

# Making the Right Connections in High School

## Developing Teaching Teams to Integrate the Curriculum

Each year, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), in association with the National Writing Project (NWP), presents the James Moffett Memorial Award at the NCTE annual Conference on English Education. Through this award, grants of up to \$1,000 are given to one or more K-12 classroom educators to support teacher research projects inspired by the work of James Moffett.

BY CARLA GUBITZ JANKOWSKI

"If you want to get ahead, you need the right connections." No doubt, many of us have found this advice helpful in our lives, but I believe this old adage goes far beyond the implication that knowing the right people will open doors for us. Intellectually, our brains thrive on connections too, searching for patterns and interconnections as the way to make meaning. James Burke, a well-known writer and host of the PBS documentary series *Connections*, proposes that "learning to identify the pattern of connections between ideas, people and events is the first step towards understanding the context and relevance of information" (Burke, 1999). Unfortunately, traditional education, especially at the high school level, which I teach, doesn't do enough to encourage either personal or intellectual connections.

I came to this conclusion when I began teaching after 15 years of working as a graphic designer and marketing manager. I was prepared to bring my experiences from business into the classroom. I wanted to help my students see, as I had seen, that everything they were learning in school would build the foundation for their future quests and questions. I was unprepared, however, for how disconnected I felt from other teachers. Isolated in our respective classrooms, we taught our subjects disconnected from the ways we used them in our non-teaching lives.

This was a stark contrast to my business experience, where my personal connections had included daily meetings with other professionals. We had collaborated, argued, and compromised to get the job done. My teaching experience was nothing like that. Except for monthly department meetings or a few quick words exchanged while waiting at the copy machine, teachers have very little opportunity to share with each other what they do in their classrooms.

The experience of my students also was at odds with what I knew would likely be their experience in the working world. In business, I had drawn on all my educational resources—knowledge and skills in science, mathematics, history, reading, writing, and research—to create budgets, conduct meetings, write letters, or plan trips. None of these tasks had fallen neatly into 40- or 50-minute periods devoted to one skill or subject area like one finds in the traditional high school.

This is why James Moffett argued vehemently that curricular integration should be the goal of education—for the simple reason that "life is not divided into subjects" (Moffett, 1992). The jigsaw approach to learning only works when the entire puzzle is finally put together. When students are repetitively taught to focus on math, then English, then history, and are not required to link them in some way, they lose the

This is the last in a series of three articles in *The Voice* featuring last year's Moffett Award honorees and following-up on each of the winning project proposals. Can they be replicated elsewhere? In this issue, we look at a team-teaching project proposed and implemented by teacher Carla Gubitzi Jankowski.

ability to make the critical connections that work and life will demand of them. Further, they lose the enthusiasm that comes from playing with the puzzle pieces and the excitement of discovering where they fit.

But integrating the traditional high school curriculum isn't easy. Even after the wall of resistance from school board members, administrators, union representatives, parents and fellow teachers has been broken down, integration takes time and commitment. Many schools have found that a first step toward building an integrated curriculum is the process of creating teams of teachers from diverse subject areas. For team teaching to work, however, teachers need administrative support and time for pedagogical discussions that will lead to a greater understanding about what will be taught and how it will be integrated. This understanding in turn leads teachers to a deeper recognition of how they work and how they relate to students, colleagues, and parents.

Morton East High School in Cicero, Illinois, where I teach, has been experimenting with several models of team teaching for over a decade, beginning in 1992 with American Studies, a class that combined American history and American literature. The students who took this class scored higher on our local writing assessment than the students who took history

