

Joining up the curriculum

Ideas on maximising cross-curricular opportunities in the language classroom

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Dieser Beitrag beschreibt, wie fächerübergreifende Konzepte im Unterricht verwirklicht werden können. Der Autor untersucht Bedürfnisse, Motivation und Verantwortlichkeit im Zusammenhang mit Wandel und Innovation in Schulen. Jede dieser Dimensionen wird mit Beispielen aus dem Klassenzimmer und anderen Lernkontexten belegt. Damit werden Ressourcen, Netzwerke und Projekte sichtbar gemacht, die zu wirksamen Praktiken des Sachfach und Sprache integrierenden Unterrichts führen können. Dafür sind solide Führungs- und Entscheidungsprozesse notwendig, und Lehrpersonen sollten ihr Engagement anerkannt bekommen.

Basic management training proposes that any individual's innovative progress can be explained by three key factors: need, want and obligation. In other words this means that a person develops either because they need to, because they want to, or because they have to. This article is based on a presentation on this principle in examining the hidden question in the title – How can we best get new cross-curricular ideas to become a reality in the classroom? The event in which this presentation was given focused on 'innovation' in education and how to make it a reality in the classroom. Innovation is a form of change and any change from the daily classroom norm can depend on any one or a combination of a number of factors. In fact, we can bring much innovation and change in the classroom and elsewhere down to three simple factors: need, want and obligation.

Interpreting the three factors in classroom-speak, let us consider how they might sound when related to practising teachers and the classroom reality. 1) In thinking about *need*, let us change the perspective a little and consider need from the point of view of *opportunity*. What opportunity do teachers have in terms of time, resources and contacts to bring cross-curricular work into their teaching and learning? 2) As far as *want* is concerned, let us consider where colleagues find the stimulus, the desire and the vision for cross-curricular innovation. What motivates teachers to innovate? 3) In thinking about *obligation* we can examine what formal expectations there are

placed on teachers in a system looking to promote cross-curricular language learning.

Cross-curricular opportunities

Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work
(Thomas Eddison)

First, let us consider opportunity and its role in bringing innovation into classroom reality.

It is a much repeated truism that teachers have little time to do anything but what they are expected to do – teach their subject. Once we accept this truth, the next step is to look at how we can alleviate some of the load teachers have to carry or are expected to carry when asked to innovate in their classrooms and bring the rest of the curriculum into their language lessons.

Two clear suggestions can be made:

- Teachers need to have access to projects and resources which have already been tried and tested and which are readily available to use with very little effort on the part of a new-comer teacher.
- Teachers need, by default, to be able to connect with their peers. This means that teachers need to be joined to networks of same-subject, like-minded colleagues seeking similar shared input, suggestions and ideas.

Projects and resources

The biggest resource-based exchange programme on the Internet for the last two decades has been and still is Science Across the World.¹ This programme is a bank of resources for general Science projects. It offers a global network of contacts for carrying out cross-curricular exchange projects with schools in other countries. It is Internet-based and exploits ICT for cross-curricular learning.

Example topics from the Science Across the World programme have included Road Safety; Genetics; Food and Drink.



Students doing a speed test

The road safety project has students examining their own reaction speeds with a simple speed test which can be carried out in the classroom. The test is in fact a survey of a group which then lends itself to graphical representation in order to be sent to partner classrooms around the world for comparison.



Receptors on a human tongue

The genetics topic has students examining the local social issues of genetic science as well as promoting an understanding of genetic

heredity and variety. Countries differ widely in legislation concerning genetic modification and one of the aims of this project is to find out about food labelling, news items, as well as government policy on genetic science and food production. Additionally, students consider visible aspects of their own genetic identity, record their findings and exchange these with partner schools in other countries.



Doing the taster test

An example of the information gathered for exchange in the genetics topic is measuring the numbers of papillae on the tongues of students to count the numbers of low tasters, medium tasters and supertasters in their classes. While surveying may be a common activity in many subjects, this topic area comes from the biology curriculum. What then is the interest for the language classroom?

In fact, we can bring much innovation and change in the classroom and elsewhere down to three simple factors: need, want and obligation.

The language of heredity

Naming parts of the face

Eyes, nose, ears, earlobes, eye-brows,
hair, chin, cheeks

Describing facial features

S/He has / has got
Her/His ... is/are ...
(brown, green, blue, blond,
red, grey)
(round, thin, fat, long, short, flat,
curly, straight, spiky, wavy)

Describing inherited characteristics

He gets his ... from his ...
She gets her ... from her ...
He looks like his ...
She looks like her ...
He takes after his ... with his
She takes after her ... with her
He has inherited his mother's ...
She has inherited her mother's ...

S/He has (got)	(a)	(adjective) long brown	face nose hair
Her/His...	ears eyes	is/are...	blue green curly
He/she gets his/her	nose hair colour hair	from his/her	mother father grandmother grandfather

The real challenge for the language teacher here is precisely having the opportunity, knowing about the content, the activity and the skills involved, since we can clearly see the relevance for the lexis and syntax of the language learning curriculum in the image here.

Another very popular project topic is 'What did you eat?' which focuses learners' attention on food and drink habits. Here, students examine data on diet and disease, consider and record data on their own eating habits for exchange with partner schools.

Finding exciting and meaningful projects for our language learners to engage in is not that difficult. More challenging is finding good partner classes to work with and make the project work as an 'exchange' and therefore a focus for communication.

The medium of exchange is another factor for motivation since it essentially involves how students communicate with their audience. The image above shows students working on two exchange media. The first is a poster of the results of their 'What did you eat?' class survey and the second is a 3-page newsletter collating the poster and various other data on the group's eating and drinking habits.

Food and drink diary



Networking

Communication motivating innovation can happen not only between learner exchange groups, but also between collaborating teachers. Unfortunately, the relative isolation of teachers at the chalkface does not help promote interschool teacher collaboration. Though there are numerous networking opportunities available for teachers, good working exchange partners can be very difficult to find. From personal experience of over 15 years of working with in-service teacher training groups all over the world, the general impression of this writer is that teachers do not systematically use professional electronic forums or communities when it is precisely in these groups that teachers can find motivation for innovative approaches in their work. At the time of writing, the Forum for Across the Curriculum Teaching² has over 3300 teachers globally and all with an interest in cross-curricular teaching. While it is a substantial and thriving group of teachers, its growth has relied on two factors. Firstly, teacher meetings have been a stimulus for joining the FACTWorld community, and others. Secondly, colleagues join up via

word of mouth. What is needed is a mechanism in schools which systematizes such membership, for it is only with being subscribed to the group that colleagues have the *opportunity* to get involved in the innovative activities shared and discussed in the communities. In short, the responsibility for getting colleagues signed up to electronic communities rests squarely with senior colleagues, department heads and managers since they are more likely to be aware and informed of the existence of such groups. The opposite, where colleagues are left to random access to these groups, means that the risk of isolation will continue.

ELTeCS, The English Language Teaching Contacts Scheme,³ is a global network of regionally organized sub-groups with a population of over 20,000 teachers worldwide where colleagues can find out about all manner of activity from conference to classroom level. BEP⁴ or The Bilingual Education Platform, much the work of one person, is a clearinghouse of news and events for bilingual and multilingual educational activity around the world. The CLIL Cascade Network⁵ is a site which posts information about EU courses for integrating language and content. Colleagues in schools may have their own networks, perhaps even country-specific ones or subject-specific ones. Whatever networks teachers are in, keeping connected is the name of the game where innovation is concerned.

Cross-curricular visions

Vision is the art of seeing what is invisible to others (Jonathan Swift)

How often do teachers get the chance to ‘showcase’ what they do, or to see the excellent work of other teachers and students? How frequently do colleagues get to talk with other teachers about their work, and share ideas about fantastic learning opportunities?

A part of motivating colleagues to bring the curriculum into their language classroom involves being informed about what is going on in other parts of the curriculum, in the rest of the ‘world’ of the curriculum.

There are more places to find ‘fantastic learning opportunities’ than is possible to describe here. Suffice it to say that once a school manager or senior colleague begins to collect and share the information which is available, the process of encouraging and implementing innovation will have begun. Educational activity discussion groups like ‘BIG’, The British Interactive Group⁶, with their website and discussion group dedicated to promoting discussion about innovation and excitement in education in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths are an example of this process in action.

Educational and Campaign Exhibitions such as Zero Carbon City, Space UK and DNA50 are examples of exhibitions which lend themselves to add-on activities with learners through the medium of the English language.



Dusseldorf teens design, build and launch their own rockets (7)

The Young Ambassadors of Chemistry project has young people interact with the public to engage them with science and learning and brings science into the public domain in a meaningful and exciting way. The last event in this genre under the auspices of the International Year of Chemistry was the Global Stamp Competition⁸ and had young people the world over designing a stamp which integrates culture and chemistry. First prize of \$500 went to a young innovator in Bulgaria.

Schools linking projects

There are a number of opportunities for school partnerships in Europe through EU, and other, institutions and many countries have

their own organizations for helping schools set up such links. One additional problem despite this, is finding the schools themselves. While the systems are there, the willing institutions, schools and people are more difficult to identify. Where schools do not have existing partnerships in place with schools in other countries, investing time and effort in finding the right partners is essential to successful curriculum exchange projects.

The networks mentioned above are a good place to start to look for partners and it is worth casting the net as widely as possible in order to have the best chance of finding good partners. Where a school has a culture for school partnerships, there is likely to be a teacher experienced in managing such links, a good step for schools to take is to train younger colleagues to take up the role at a later stage. In the same way, schools should be encouraged to find projects to join where there are experienced partners and so this experience can be passed on through the project itself. Again, there is a clear role here for school managers and senior teachers to think strategically about this issue and plan for identifying partners and participants, as well as coordinating curriculum links. The vast majority of postings to the FACTWorld email group at the time of writing concerns school linking partnerships and this reflects the growing desire for schools in Europe to find partners and access EU funding to develop their curriculum linking projects.

Cross-curricular expectations

If you expect nothing from anybody, you are never disappointed (Sylvia Plath)

Teachers need to know what is expected of them. If we expect teachers to integrate their classrooms with the rest of the curriculum, this assumes

that a plan is in place for integrating the curriculum which teachers can follow. Such a plan will highlight not only language, but also skills and concepts and how they overlap and connect throughout the curriculum. This idea suggests a good deal of effective cross-curricular coordination *before* we get teachers on board and bringing the curriculum into their language classrooms. Heidi Hayes-Jacobs writes about cross-curricular interdepartmental information sharing, specifically with respect to literacy across the curriculum in US schools (in "Literacy across the curriculum", 2006). Literacy aside, coordination and transparency are key to innovation in education. At the moment, too many teachers are not expected to link what they do with the rest of the curriculum. As the quotation above suggests, are we really to be satisfied with this situation?

Furthermore, teachers should be accredited for what they do to integrate their language lessons with the curriculum at large. It entails work above and beyond the job description, and so they should be rewarded, plainly and openly for this effort. This may not necessarily mean financial reward, but at the very least any long-term foreign language teaching (FLT) curriculum development integrating FLT with other subjects should involve time allocation for teachers working on this development.

Additionally, a dimension of curriculum integration which is not readily explicit is that language classrooms become places where cross-curricular projects are carried out by default. This aspect of the challenge of curriculum integration needs to be made

explicit, and explicit to the extent that cross-curricular project work is documented in curriculum guidelines for teachers to follow. Outside the documentation of curriculum innovation, there also needs to be formalization of people interaction and coordination and this means that department meeting and discussion time be allocated to working on curriculum integration. Curriculum innovation in FLT needs openly to be on the agenda.

Lastly, but by no means least, teachers should be discouraged from taking on cross-curricular innovation and development single-handedly. Although, there may be high emotion and some success, in the long term there is a strong risk of burn-out and failure for the teacher involved.

Links and references (accessed on 08.02.2012)

¹ www.scienceacross.org

² <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/factworld/>

³ <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/eltecs>

⁴ <http://www.bepnetwork.com/>

⁵ <http://www.ccn-clil.eu/>

⁶ <http://www.big.uk.com/> and big-chat@yahoo.com

⁷ <http://www.factworld.info/germany/space/index.htm>

⁸ http://www.factworld.info/bulgaria/IYC_Stamp_11/index.htm

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