

Teachers Planning Collaboratively for a Cross-Curricular Project with First Years: An Evaluation

Executive Summary

Aim

As Educate Together prepares for the opening of its first second-level schools in September 2014, this project was designed as part of on-going research into integrated approaches to curriculum with students in the Junior Cycle age range.

The aim was to evaluate the perceived quality of teaching and learning when teachers collaborate in planning and developing a cross-curricular project with 1st Year students.

We would like to acknowledge the financial investment that the Ireland Funds have made in making this research project possible.

Methodology

This project is a case study within an overall action research cycle whereby Educate Together aims to explore and define possible approaches to curriculum integration at post-primary level. A comparative evaluation was undertaken between two independent cross-curricular short projects developed and undertaken in separate schools in late 2012 and early 2013.

Qualitative data was collected, using a number of data collection tools, as follows: For students - reflection journals and sheets, post-project questionnaires, work output (presentations/projects) blogs, and post-project interviews.

For teachers: interviews at pre - and post - planning and post-project stages, written reflective summaries and post-project questionnaires.

Data gathered were used to identify effective elements of the cross-curricular collaboration and key challenges presented by the process from both teacher and student perspectives.

Two schools volunteered to participate in a cross-curricular project based around a single theme, self-selected by the school group.

Árd Scoil Rís is an all-boys, Catholic voluntary secondary school located in Marino, Dublin 9.

St. Oliver's Community College is a co-educational, multi-denominational school located in Drogheda.

In both schools three teachers participated in the project, each from subject departments, and the teachers worked with a group of first year students on the project over five weeks during the January to March school term.

A total of six teachers and forty six students participated in the project overall.

In both cases the teachers collaborated with their colleagues on the design of the project including identification of a central theme, definition of learning outcomes and agreement of teaching methods to be used. Student input was facilitated by the teachers on how the projects would be executed and evaluated.

Air and the Discovery of Oxygen: Árd Scoil Rís, Marino, Co. Dublin

Students examined the discovery of oxygen in its historical context. The project was cross-curricular between French, History and Science and teaching methods included French vocabulary, scientific experiments, research of oxygen related innovations and the study of the social and political circumstances of the time.

Students worked individually and in groups on specific project elements and conducted independent research using the Internet. The project ran over four weeks and culminated in a display of information on each subject theme and a PowerPoint presentation, by the students, to the project evaluators from Educate Together.

Then and Now – Life in Drogheda: St. Oliver's Community College, Drogheda, Co. Louth

Students explored the social and working lives of people in Drogheda at a vibrant time in local history, when Drogheda was a booming industrial centre.

The three subject areas were History, Geography and English with some additional ICT support.

Learning activities included a guided historical walking tour of Drogheda, interviews with local senior citizens a visit to the local Millmount museum, a 'then and now' photography element, internet research and an interactive blog as both a teaching and a reflective tool.

The project took place over five weeks and culminated in a photographic and informational exhibition and performance of a play written by the students reflecting what they learned about the era, to another class of first year students, the project evaluators and a number of invited teachers and staff.

Findings

Teachers identified that their own teaching skills were developed and improved as a result of:

- A more 'natural' and 'holistic' manner of teaching.
- Teamwork, collaboration and collegial support.
- Collaboration with students allowing all to claim ownership of the project through a process of facilitating student decision making about aspects of the project implementation and evaluation.
- Developing awareness of students' potential to be responsible for their own learning.
- Sharing of good practice and 'cross-fertilization of ideas' between teachers.
- Engaging in strategies and teaching methods such as group work, student led research, creative methods to demonstrate learning and use of technologies.
- Opportunity to draw on personal skills/knowledge in the classroom such as ICT and photography skills.
- Reflective and evaluative aspect of the project.

In addition to professional skill development the teachers noted that students engaged more readily and fully in both projects, both individually and as team members. Teachers credited this to:

- Student appreciation of the new methodologies used in this project.
- Collaboration and sense of ownership by and with students.
- Student participation in project design and execution.
- Projects designed to relate to students' own lives & experiences.

For teachers, time constraints were a dual challenge of not enough time available, for project planning, delivery or assessment, as well as difficulty in timetabling the various components of the project from planning through to assessment.

A secondary impact was that 'some dilution of content became necessary due to time constraints' a sentiment echoed by comments from students who wanted more time to study the project at a deeper level.

In both schools the projects required a considerable amount of extra effort by and negotiation with other staff members to facilitate timetabling, class swapping, room reallocation and extra class time

Evaluation of the impact of the collaborative planning process on both learning and teaching was central to this project.

Feedback from participants identified many benefits of such collaboration as well as specific challenges to this approach in the current post-primary context in Irish schools.

The broad scope offered to teachers within which to create their projects highlighted issues around lack of experience in the use of devising and developing cross-curricular projects, and a dependence on specifically defined course content 'to be covered.'

Written reflections from participating teachers were general rather than detailed or specific about the process.

A lack of clear assessment or feedback guidelines and processes in both school projects raises questions about the confidence of teachers in developing relevant assessment mechanisms for such projects, particularly in the absence of clear external exam-based requirements.

Processes empowering teachers to have confidence in their own professional judgement may prove critical if teachers are to consider participating in cross-curricular course development in the future.

Recommendations

Facilitating effective cross-curricular and collaborative project development in existing schools will require a number of considerations:

- Allocation of sufficient planning and development time for teachers involved in course and project development
- Examination of the standard 40 minute class block system and its appropriateness for effective implementation of the New Junior Cycle Framework
- Assessment of timetabling for the whole school to accommodate new approaches to teaching and learning

- Provision for easy access to resources and information at the school level
- Support and training for teachers in course development and assessment methods
- CPD in technologies and their applications in group project work
- Staff training and support around teamwork skills as both team members and facilitators
- CPD on techniques to develop partnered responsibility for learning with students
- Promotion of the NCCA template and short course samples for teacher use

The experience of both schools in this project was enthusiastically positive. Replicating and expanding this impact on learning and teaching, to a broader base of schools, will require commitment at a school administrative level and support at a professional organisational level.

