

A 'Big Questions' approach to curriculum development in Social Studies

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It is quite amazing to think that something that started as a collective lunchtime gripe has turned into the most interesting professional collaboration of my career. I am blessed to work in a wonderful faculty with colleagues that I also consider to be friends. Griping, especially after lunch, is something that we do quite often and is almost always good humoured. A collective moan a day keeps the stress levels at bay! This particular gripe, one which I am sure has echoed across many staffrooms, focussed on a lack of general knowledge of the world within our junior classes. The consensus was that this was becoming especially problematic as they moved into the Senior Phase in school. What we considered to be basic knowledge of the world had to be addressed before we could begin to develop the concepts of the courses we were teaching. For example, it became apparent in a class discussion on the Tsar as head of the Russian Orthodox Church, that the vast majority of the class had no understanding that there were different Christian denominations.

As a faculty we had already begun to discuss how we would like to change our S1 curriculum to make it more integrated across the three subjects (History, Geography and Modern Studies) and this conversation triggered a gestalt moment with regard to how we might go about structuring this. In my mind, I thought that our course should give pupils an understanding of the 'Big Questions' in life (although I wasn't completely sure what I meant at this time) and an introduction to the knowledge, understanding, skills, concepts and ideas that we thought were important for their development across Social Subjects and the school. It was a relief that when I discussed this basic idea with my Faculty Head that she positively encouraged me to take it forward. This led to a faculty consultation and a series of meetings on how this might be designed and enacted collaboratively.

Prior to the first meeting, I carried out research on some of the purposes and approaches to Social Studies (Ross 2014, Scottish Government 2009) and began to look at the conceptual understanding required across the subjects as disciplines in their own right. This, coupled with the indicative descriptors of the 4 capacities for learning (Scottish Executive 2004), became the starting point for planning our S1 curriculum. As the thinking behind our S1 course developed, our main rationale was to design a curriculum that helped to frame and nurture our pupils' knowledge, understanding, and curiosity of the big questions related to our world. Our intention was to try to develop a deeper understanding of humanity and their place in the world by investigating questions that would range from the formation of the universe, through human development and impact, and finally to

the future of civilisation and the planet. This key knowledge of humanity, and our place in the world, along with the development of the 4 capacities; pupils as learners, contributors, individuals and citizens (consciously without the adjectives to obscure their meaning) were the main purposes of our new curriculum. All the knowledge, understanding, skills, attributes and capabilities that we set out to develop were derived from these and from the key concepts of History, Geography and Modern Studies education. With this in mind, our new curriculum would be a conflation of subject, civic and issue centred approaches to teaching social subjects where pupils would have the chance to develop the 4 capacities; their knowledge and understanding of humanity and our place in the world; their conceptual knowledge and understanding of the social subjects disciplines and to foster knowledge and understanding of events, issues or developments that they would like to investigate (Appendix 1).

Having worked out our purposes and main approaches we then had to discuss and resolve what we thought would be the best way to frame the learning for our pupils. We were aware of Christian's (2004) Big History Project and other 'Big' approaches such as Harlen's (2015) work on the importance of 'Big Ideas' in science education and we thought it would be interesting to try and develop our course as a series of major enquiry, or 'Big', questions. We wanted to create this independently and specific to our local and national context. Our original outline had 6 'Big Questions' but this was reduced to 5 as we started to plan and develop our learning intentions:

1. CONTEXT: Our world today: What is our world like today?
2. BEGINNINGS: The formation of the universe: How did the universe form?
3. HUMANS: The evolution of Homo Sapiens: Where did humans come from?
4. CIVILISATIONS: Living together: Have humans always lived together?
5. FUTURES: The future for planet Earth: Can we predict our future?

Within each of these units we created a series of enquiry questions (Appendix 2) that we would use to structure the lessons and we paired up across subject disciplines to begin planning the course for the following year. We also decided that we would continue to take a predominantly social-constructivist approach to the learning and teaching by using cooperative learning pedagogies based on the Johnson and Johnson (1989) social model. This approach, which we have used across the faculty for many years, encourages dialogue and discussion as well as promoting social interaction and skills-something that we were prioritising in our pupils' learning and development. The first part of the course, as we taught about our world today, would be heavily weighted towards developing team and social skills and pupils' abilities to use the Microsoft Office suite effectively. These were skills that we felt we needed to develop first to ensure we could use pupils as resources for each other and that they would have developed ICT skills to support their learning and assessment across the year. In terms of assessment, we have tried to ensure in the planning stage that we are assessing the knowledge, understanding and skills we intended to develop in a variety of ways and with an element of pupil choice. We devised a variety of assessments that were designed to show pupils' knowledge and understanding of the contexts for learning; pupils presentation skills; literacy and numeracy skills;

skills in using ICT applications; making reasoned judgements; paired and team working skills; and research skills.

For several years I had been seconded part time to the ITE team at the University of Stirling and I had a number of discussions with Dr Joe Smith on the curriculum ideas that we were implementing in school. Joe showed some interest in the project and commented that it was probably quite unique across Scotland. Joe, who has an academic interest in curriculum development in History and Social Studies education, thought that it would be worthwhile to apply to the British Curriculum Foundation (BCF) for a BCF Curriculum Investigation Grant to research more formally the impact of this approach with our S1 pupils. The BCF Curriculum Investigation Grant is a biennial award intended to support research led by schools and colleges' with a focus on curriculum inquiry and investigation. The grant is worth up to £5,000 for the winner, with £3,500 for two other grants. Applicants must identify an issue impacting on the development of an aspect of the curriculum in their school and then design, implement and evaluate a response to this. After the inquiry is complete, the processes and outcomes must be disseminated within the school or college and a strategy formed to sustain curriculum investigation and inquiry in future years. Joe led the work of drafting the proposal and gaining ethical approval from the University of Stirling to carry out the research. The project would involve the evaluation of the effectiveness of our approach to interdisciplinary social studies with two research questions which could be investigated simultaneously:

1. What are the benefits and limitations of a 'Big Questions' approach to pupil learning in social studies?
2. How might a 'Big Questions' approach encourage collaborative working in integrated social studies faculties?

We decided that to make it manageable our research and data collection would be limited but include staff-peer-lesson observations; the evaluation and assessment of pupil work; online engagement and learning surveys; curriculum development meetings; staff surveys; and staff peer observations. All of these methods already formed part of our faculty's commitment to continuous improvement and so were familiar to staff and pupils alike. We also proposed to set up a buddy structure to allow teachers to share ideas with colleagues in another subject area as well as more formal curriculum development meetings (the minutes of which would form part of the data set). We applied to the BCF for the curriculum grant before we broke up for the summer holidays and we found out at the beginning of August that we had been successful and had secured second place and funding of £3500 to take the project forward. The money is already being used to support the research and the teaching and learning across our Big Questions. Approximately half the money will be used for staffing time to allow school practitioners and Joe to carry out the research and write up of the final 6,000 word report for the BCF for dissemination. The rest of the money has been earmarked for curriculum resources and we have already agreed that a portion of this will be set aside to buy artefact boxes, globes and ICT resources. Discussions are ongoing on how we will use the rest of the funds to support teaching and learning

across the year and to ensure, as required by the BCF conditions, that it is sustainable into future sessions.

There is no getting around the fact that it has been difficult to deliver this as planned during the pandemic. We have tried to mitigate this by delivering team activities and tasks in pairs; the moving of planning and review meetings into video chat applications; the use of pupils own devices to share resources; and by delaying the delivery of ICT skills and applications until the restrictions are reduced. However, because of the constraints put upon in terms of sharing resources, contact tracing, the closure of educational facilities and the use of the schools ICT resources we have had to change our initial learning intentions and outcomes. Hopefully, as we move back into normality in the coming months, we can ensure our curriculum plans and vision are again fully realised in the classroom and the learning spaces beyond.

Find out more about the BERA Curriculum Investigation Grant (including details on how to apply) at <https://tinyurl.com/y3qcdhdg>

References:

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