Integrated Arts Curriculum: An interdisciplinary approach

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Abstract

This subject of this paper is the transformation of one school's traditional, discipline-based middle school arts education model into an integrated arts curriculum. It examines various approaches to curriculum integration in the arts and reviews the strengths, weaknesses and tensions that can exist in an interdisciplinary approach to middle school arts curriculum, particularly for Music educators.

Introduction

Through the examination of one school's approach to curriculum reform this paper explores the complexities of interdisciplinary curriculum development and highlights the strengths, weaknesses and tensions that often exist in an interdisciplinary curriculum model. This paper describes four different approaches to 'integrated' curricula as identified by Wiggins (2001) and locates the case study within these different approaches. The case study that is presented in this paper is based on experiences in curriculum reform at a K-12 independent school in regional Victoria between 2003 and 2005.

Types of Integrated Curriculum

Before describing the case featured in this paper it is important to understand what is meant by the term 'integrated curriculum' and to locate the case within the various approaches to integration. Wiggins (2001, p. 272) distinguishes between three types of integrated

curriculum: integrated, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary, and suggests also a fourth in which 'an interdisciplinary curriculum reflects a multiplicity of disciplines'.

Wiggins (2001) defines an 'integrated' curriculum as one which is distinguished by the teaching of multiple disciplines within one lesson 'based on the idea that, since real world problems are not divided into separate subjects, teaching should not be either' (p. 272). The 'integrated' curriculum presented by Wiggins (2001) highlights the idea of a 'cognitive apprenticeship' which seeks to ensure that learning in a school context is 'more like "life" learning' (p. 18). This 'real life' approach to teaching and learning through an integrated curriculum does occur, perhaps most notably in the primary school context, but it is rare in secondary school contexts.

'Real life' learning is the theoretical basis for both Wiggins's approach to learning and the interdisciplinary approach to curriculum integration. According to Ellis & Fouts (2001) integrated curriculum is based on a progressive philosophy of education:

> The primary theoretical basis of interdisciplinary curriculum is found in progressive educational philosophy. The progressive movement is a child-centred approach to learning that places great emphasis on creativity, activities, 'naturalistic' learning, real world outcomes, and, above all, experience…progressives have consistently decried the artificial teaching and learning conditions deriving from the dominance of textbooks and written exams. Their claim is that school learning is so unlike the real world that it has little or no meaning to the average child p. 23.

In her discussion of 'integration' Wiggins (2001) also describes the traditional multidisciplinary model of curriculum and suggests that the maintenance of separate disciplines in the curriculum reinforces a need to 'look at problems from different perspectives' (p. 272). This suggestion highlights the different processes often required to solve problems in different areas of study. However, it also ignores the connections between areas of study that are the focus of integrated approaches and is certainly not consistent with the 'real life' approach to teaching and learning put forward by Wiggins.

Following, Wiggins (2001, p. 272) presents the concept of an interdisciplinary curriculum in which otherwise distinct subjects are studied through the use of themed lessons or units. The author (2001) highlights two limitations to this approach that may occur: firstly, this may merely be 'little more than separate subjects taught in close proximity' or, secondly, 'one content area juxtaposed with another to strengthen the first without giving due regard to the second' (p. 272). An obvious example of this problematic integration may be when music is added to a Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE) lesson to 'support' the objectives of the SOSE teaching and learning without due regard to musical learning.

Finally, Wiggins (2001, p. 272) suggests that 'when an interdisciplinary curriculum reflects a multiplicity of disciplines, it opens the possibility of multiple worldviews and deeper understanding for students'. In this type of curriculum it is the conceptual and process connections between the multiple disciplines that are significant rather than the content that is taught (Wiggins, 2001, p. 276). The distinguishing feature of this type of curriculum is the 'connectedness' of the learning that can take place in different subject areas.

The case referred to in the following section of this paper is not strictly speaking an approach to the integrated arts as suggested by the conference strand 'Integrated Arts in Communities', nor is it an 'integrated' curriculum as suggested by Wiggins (2001). Rather, it is an interdisciplinary curriculum in which artistic processes connect the learning that takes place in individual disciplines. In this approach the metacognitive learning that occurs is of a higher importance relative to context specific learning, and is certainly more akin to the 'real life' type of learning promoted by Wiggins (2001). In an interdisciplinary arts context this approach requires learning about artistic practices and about the processes of artistic creation. The following case study represents a conceptually connected, interdisciplinary curriculum.

Case Study: A Conceptual and Process Connected, Interdisciplinary Curriculum

This section presents an overview of the approach to curriculum reform in the middle school arts taken by one K-12 independent college in regional Victoria between 2003 and 2005. It is divided into the following four sections:

1. The school context for reform;

2. Conceptual connections between disciplines;

3. Measuring student progress; and

4. A Music education example - Year 5.

The school context for reform

At the school in question, the process of curriculum reform in the arts was framed by a school-wide process of reform in which traditional subject areas were re-defined, content-based subject areas re-constructed with reference to essential learning outcomes, and new methods of assessment and reporting were developed. Reform began with an evaluation of the curriculum for Years 5–9, and six subjects were developed as a result of that process: Literacy, Numeracy, Thinking, Global Learning, Personal Futures, and Creativity. Fundamental to the new curriculum was the decision that all six areas were to be valued equally and, hence, should receive equal time in the weekly timetable. The individual disciplines in the visual and performing arts were combined underneath the umbrella subject of 'Creativity', with the new area being allocated four hours per week in the timetable.

To maximise teaching time it was decided to 'trimesterise' Creativity subjects, thus providing six intensive 13-week periods of teaching and learning over two years. During years 7 and 8, students were required to complete at least one trimester of Music (Band, Brass, Strings, Woodwind), one of Performing Arts (Dance, Drama 1, Drama 2, Theatre Studies, and

Production), and one of Visual Arts (Painting and Drawing, Printmaking, Textiles, Sculpture, Visual Communication). This arrangement, therefore, included an 'introduction' to each of the art forms and provided students with flexibility as they made decisions about upon which area they would focus upon.

Conceptual connections between disciplines

The most important feature of the new 'Creativity' grouping was the development and application of shared Essential Learning Outcomes (ELOs) for all subjects. An ELO is an explicit statement of the learning that each student must complete in a given subject. Three Creativity ELOs were developed: Exploration; Development and Refinement; and, Presentation and Reflection. Each ELO included three 'aspects' of learning. The final ELOs and their aspects, adopted by the school, were as follows:

ELO 1: Exploration

1.1   Exploration of personal responses

1.2   Explore and record ideas

1.3   Exploration of research and analysis skills

ELO 2: Development and Refinement

2.1   Development and refinement of creative ideas

2.2   Development and refinement of skills and techniques

2.3   Development and refinement of creative appreciation

ELO 3: Presentation and Reflection

3.1   Preparation for presentation

3.2   Presentation

3.3   Reflection on presentation

Measuring student progress

The provision of accurate and timely feedback to students and parents, in respect of student progress, was regarded as an essential component of the new curriculum. Developmental continua were devised as a means of both tracking student learning and reporting on that learning for each ELO in each subject area. Developmental continua focus on the explicit statement of learning outcomes through which a student may progress over a given period of time. Wyatt-Smith and Ludwig (1988) refer to developmental continua as 'progress mapping' or as a 'profile', stating that 'a typical developmental continuum…is drawn up from a learning area…and individual student progress can be mapped against what is considered to be typical' (cited in Brady & Kennedy, 2001, p. 15). Continua provided the means by which individual student progress could be mapped against ELOs by stakeholders and through which the learning embedded in individual tasks was made explicit. Examples of typical developmental continua are provided in Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4.

Students were engaged continually in conversations with their teachers and their peers about the meaning of specific continua and what progress on those continua "looked like" in each context. These conversations served to deepen student engagement in the process of learning, and empowered students to manage their own progress. These discussions provided a context for the development of metacognitive processes among students in which thinking about learning and managing learning were central themes. An example of the ways in which students were encouraged to reflect on their own learning was through a 'Creativity' journal or log book in which they regularly reflected on the activities undertaken in class.

A Music education example - Year 5

The following section provides an example of one task devised around the Liberian folk song *Banuwa*, developed for the Year 5 music context. From the outset of the trimester, Year 5 students learned about Western staff notation and terminology, including memorising and continually reviewing the symbols for notes values and rests and the notes of the treble clef. This learning took place within small group activities that focused on rhythmic understanding through body-percussion techniques. This learning related to ELO 1.2 (Figure 1). Note that the continuum includes an indication of the standard of learning for Year 5 students, once again encouraging clear and transparent expectations and student management of learning.

Figure 1. ELO 1.2: Explore and record ideas

	6	Has demonstrated a clear understanding of all of the music notation and terminology covered and has been able to apply this understanding in a variety of complex contexts
	5	Has demonstrated an understanding of all of the music notation and terminology covered and has been able to apply this understanding in all activities
	4	Has demonstrated an understanding of all of the music notation and terminology covered and has been able to apply this understanding in some activities
	3	Has demonstrated an understanding of all of the music notation and terminology covered
Year 5 level ☛	2	Has demonstrated a basic understanding of most of the music notation and terminology covered
	1	Has demonstrated a basic understanding of some of the music notation and terminology covered

Over the trimester students had also learned and continually reviewed traditional Western solfege, solfege syllables and Curwen hand signs within the context of simple songs such as *Banuwa*. This song has three melodic lines and students learnt all of these parts in solfege with the accompanying hand signs. This learning related directly to ELO 2.2 (Figure 2).

Figure 2. ELO 2.2: Development and refinement of skills and techniques

	6	Through the performance of music has demonstrated the use of all of the higher level musical skills and techniques covered
	5	Through the performance of music has demonstrated the use of

		most of the higher level musical skills and techniques covered
	4	Through the performance of music has demonstrated the use of some of the higher level musical skills and techniques covered
	3	Through the performance of music has demonstrated the use of all of the basic musical skills and techniques covered
Year 5 level ☛	2	Through the performance of music has demonstrated the use of most of the basic musical skills and techniques covered
	1	Through the performance of music has demonstrated the use of some of the basic musical skills and techniques covered

Teachers encouraged students to transfer their singing of *Banuwa* to their understanding of notation by asking, for example, 'If doh is C then what is re?' and so forth. Students worked out the letter names of all three melodic lines of the song thus exploring the connections between the solfege and the traditional notation. Following, students applied their note reading and singing to an instrumental context through tuned percussion instruments. Next, students were asked to learn to perform the piece in ensembles of four or five. This learning related directly to ELO 2.2 (Figure 2). Students presented their final performance of *Banuwa* using tuned percussion instruments. This learning related directly to ELO 3.2 (Figure 3).

Figure 3. ELO 3.2: Reflection on presentation

	6	Has demonstrated the ability to present well-prepared and stylistically correct performances of all of the pieces prepared in class
	5	Has demonstrated the ability to present well-prepared and stylistically correct performances of some of the pieces prepared in class
	4	Has demonstrated the ability to present well-prepared performances of all of the pieces prepared in class
	3	Has demonstrated the ability to present well-prepared performances of some of the pieces prepared in class
Year 5 level ☛	2	Has demonstrated the ability to present basic performances of all of the pieces prepared in class
	1	Has demonstrated the ability to present basic performances of some of the pieces prepared in class

The final step in the process was for students to reflect on their performance and on the process of preparing that performance in their 'Creativity' journal. Journal responses usually included: a description of the activities completed in class, the basic information about the

task – such as 'today we sang the song Banuwa using hand signs', and a reflection on these activities. This part of the activity related directly to ELO 1.1 (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. ELO 1.1: Exploration of personal responses

	6	Is able to express a clear understanding of all music and music activities undertaken in a variety of complex contexts and to express thoughtful and detailed personal reflections on these
	5	Is able to express a clear understanding of all music and music activities undertaken in a variety of different contexts and to express thoughtful and detailed personal reflections on these
	4	Is able to express a clear understanding of all music and music activities undertaken and a thoughtful personal reflections on these
	3	Is able to express an increasing understanding of music and music activities and thoughtful personal reflections on these
Year 5 level ☛	2	Is able to express a basic understanding of music and music activities and is also able to express basic reflections on these
	1	Is able to express basic understanding of music and music activities

Strengths, Weaknesses and Tensions

The case study and the example above illustrate one approach to curriculum reform that focused on the exploitation of connections between discipline areas. The process of reform was not always straightforward, required extensive staff development time and challenged many previously held positions about the nature of teaching and learning in individual subjects. This section reflects on some of the strengths, weaknesses and tensions that can exist in an interdisciplinary arts framework and that were evident in the school in question.

Strengths

There were many systemic strengths that resulted from the development of a larger arts subject grouping, these included: increased staffing levels; increased teaching contact hours over a more focused time period; and, increased levels of student engagement as a result of access to a wider variety of subjects. Stated simply, the principal systemic advantage of this interdisciplinary arts framework was that the sum of the whole was more important than its parts.

One advantage of an interdisciplinary approach is the metacognitive learning that takes place both in and through the arts. The learning that can occur through the conceptual connections that transcend disciplinary boundaries is a powerful motivation for the creation of curriculum of this type. Furthermore, this approach can empower students to make their own connections and create their own meanings within a conceptual framework that encourages inquiry. Swanwick (1979) maintains that this is the most significant advantage of integrated curriculum, stating:

> Its chief value lies in its ability to 'stimulate experiences' in a way that acting alone might never achieve. This integration only takes place when one activity directly influences and helps to form the shape of another. It is not enough merely to run several activities together in the same organisational harness. They must connect and interact and this interaction takes place through the conceptual and feeling processes of the participants (cited in Gifford, 1988, p. 123).

In the curriculum developed within the case study school the connections between 'Creativity' subjects were highlighted through the ELOs. The essential learning for example in Music subjects was transferable to visual arts subjects and/or to other performing arts subjects.

Wiggins (2001) refers to five ways that subjects may be 'connected': teaching tool connections, topic connections, thematic or content connections, conceptual connections, and process connections (p. 273). It is the 'process' connections that were a feature of the case study school curriculum. Process connections refer to 'the process through which students engage with the subject matter' such as 'organising' or 'reflecting' (Wiggins, 2001, pp. 276-278). An example of a process connection made between Music and Visual Arts may be the development of 'skills and techniques'. Within each art form skills and techniques are important means by artists may express their intention most clearly. For the musician this may refer to finger dexterity or proficiency evidenced through playing a technically challenging

piece. For the visual artist this may refer to drawing a subject with a nuance of touch that accurately reflects the character of the subject. In this example the skills and techniques themselves are not the 'essential' learning; rather it is the artistic process that is essential.

According to Wiggins (2001) in this approach 'it is teaching through conceptual and process connections that can provide opportunities for students to experience the world through a variety of perspectives, strengthening their capacity for cognitive development and enhancing the quality of their lives' (p. 276). This is consistent with the belief that the more opportunities students have to engage with and view a concept or process the deeper is the learning that will result. Detels (1999) states that 'the more connections students have with a concept, the better their chance is of accessing that concept and the knowledge about it' (p. 125).

A further advantage of an interdisciplinary approach was the depth of the conversations that took place between educators. The development of a shared language about teaching and learning in the arts, and the dialogue that occurred between educators about their own disciplines and the ways in which learning occurs in these disciplines, was invaluable. However, the most significant strength was not organisational or conceptual, but improved opportunities for students to engage in meaningful learning in the arts through a framework of connected subjects.

Weaknesses and Tensions

A common criticism of this approach is that learning is discontinuous in subject disciplines - and this is an accurate observation. I would argue, however, that the K-12 curriculum in music education, for example, is now something of an anachronism. Student populations are often transient with students moving in and out of different school contexts regularly.

Furthermore, the diversity of support for the arts in primary schools all too often means that when students enter the secondary domain the diversity of experience and skill they bring with them is often at variance with the notion of a sequential K-12 curriculum. In light of this, it may be more advantageous to design a curriculum – particularly in the middle school years – that allows for these factors and to allocate resources accordingly.

A common concern about grouping arts subjects into one area of study is that this compromises the value of the individual subjects. In one sense this is accurate in that the individual subjects no longer exist as such. The paradigm of the arts educator as the independent teacher acting in isolation in their unique area is challenged by the paradigm of the interdisciplinary curriculum. This paradigm shift challenges traditional power relations and levels of transparency and accountability, and can consequently be regarded as difficult. In the traditional curriculum grouping the subject specialist is often viewed as the most knowledgeable professional in that subject area and hence often has unchallenged authority in regards to it. The interdisciplinary curriculum challenges this paradigm by requiring teachers to look beyond individual areas of speciality towards learning in and through the arts and towards outcomes that are transferable between disciplines and hence ultimately of more meaning to students.

Detels (1999) refers to the paradigm shift often required of arts teachers if successful curriculum integration is to occur, stating that 'the integrative, interdisciplinary approach presents a difficult challenge for teachers trained in a single discipline' (p. 126). This certainly proved true in the school in question, where the re-conceptualising of traditional subject boundaries challenged both the thinking and practice of many professionals. Cosenza (2005) also refers to these challenges stating that 'Music educators may feel torn by considering the

possibilities and, at the same time, the perceived limitations of interdisciplinary curriculum. They may fear that genuine music learning will be compromised' (p. 3).

The most common challenge to overcome was indeed the perception that an interdisciplinary approach would result in the 'watering down' of subjects. This was a valid concern and was addressed at three complimentary levels: through empowering teachers to implement the change by ensuring that they were central to the design process; by ensuring that the essential learning featured in the new approach was rigorously developed and documented; and, by demonstrating the results of the process through regular exhibitions and performances that clearly demonstrated the strengths of the approach and the advantages to the greater school community.

Conclusion

The process of curriculum reform undertaken at the case study school and presented herein was by no means perfect. However, according to Wiggins, R (2001) 'an integrated curriculum is not a panacea. Under the best of circumstances, integrated teaching gives students more opportunities to make connections that lead to deeper understanding' (p. 44). This statement highlights the ultimate value of interdisciplinary curriculum: the benefit for students. This benefit lies in the real world nature of interdisciplinary curriculum in which the focus is on developing deeper understandings through the exploration of connections.

This paper has reflected on the strengths, weaknesses and tensions that may exist in an integrated arts framework through the case study of an independent K-12 school in regional Victoria. Significantly, many of the strengths, weaknesses and tensions referred to appear to

be indicative of concerns expressed by other authors and referred to herein. The shift in thinking that is required to make such an interdisciplinary model successful is significant; however, experience of this process, and the evidence presented in this paper, suggests that the advantages for students, particularly in respect of metacognitive thinking and learning in and through the arts, are substantial.

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