

Designing a senior secondary integrated programme - visual arts

Designing a senior secondary (level 7 and 8) integrated programme - visual arts (with English and media studies) at Fraser High School

Fraser High School is a co-ed suburban school in Hamilton, with about 1600 students.

Context

Over the past three to four years it had become clear that a group of senior students had a passion for visual arts and photography that often overrode their engagement in other classes. In discussion with these students during 2011, it was suggested that they might achieve more highly if they were producing work and being assessed in a range of NCEA standards, through the context of visual Arts.

At the same time as these discussions were taking place, the school's ICT cluster facilitators had a series of discussions about how assessment was driving the learning in the school. The Curriculum Integration Project grew out of these discussions. The essence of the project is that by working to produce an authentic product (a magazine), students generate evidence of rich learning that can then be assessed against a range of NCEA standards.

Students work collaboratively on the project as a group for all but one 'line' of their senior school timetable (approximately 20 hours per week). They spend the first two terms producing a magazine and an associated website, with the intention that they are both of such a standard that they will be hard to distinguish from any other boutique magazine. Once this phase of the project is completed students move on to preparing for their external NCEA assessments (Visual Arts folios, English) and completing any remaining internal assessments.

The students choose another subject for their other line of the timetable (a chance for them to have a break from the single class, and to pursue an area of learning that falls outside of the magazine project).

How does this programme ('Art Project') fit into the three year progression in this arts subject?

In year 11 students are offered two arts courses:

- painting
- photography and design

Both of these courses contribute to the skills and knowledge that the curriculum integration project demands in producing a magazine, although there is perhaps a more logical transition from the photography and design course into the 'Art Project'. As the programme involves year 12 and 13 students (mainly assessed at NCEA levels 2 and 3, although some Level 1 standards are used where needed) there is a seamless

transition.

How does the programme connect to the school's priorities?

The school has a goal around students developing e-learning capability and this programme builds students capacity to seamlessly use technologies in their learning. E-learning tools are essential to accomplish a variety of tasks.

Another school goal focuses on building relationships with the local community. Through this programme students connect with a variety of community and business organisations, such as printers, designers, tertiary, local arts community, artists (both locally and outside Hamilton). Each student interviews an artist as part of their study.

One of the school's professional learning foci is on differentiated learning. This programme is putting the "theory into practice."

How does this programme contribute to raising student achievement?

The programme is open to all students - the only criteria is "enthusiasm and passion for the subject". Self management skills come to the fore and students get opportunities to display leadership skills. It has been interesting to note that some students who were successful in the more traditional approach to schooling have struggled with the self managed aspects of the programme, while others have been more motivated by the real life challenges that the programme offers.

Where does this programme lead to for students?

The majority of year 13 leavers have gone on to tertiary arts study at university or polytechnic. There is a good relationship between the local poytech and the art department. One year 12 has returned to 'mainstream' school for her final year at secondary school. The remainder of the students have continued with the project for a second year.

Besides readiness for further study all students develop their project management and self management skills. "They are much more prepared for entrepreneurial futures."

Conditions for learning

How flexible are the learning opportunities?

Learning and assessment are intertwined in the project, much like in a traditional visual arts course. As there are deadlines for producing the magazine, the students have to complete tasks to get the magazine published. A key driver of learning (and assessment) focuses on what the students want to know and research about artists they have selected. So there is flexibility in the choices students make about the artist they want to research. But as they are producing a magazine to a deadline, there are some restrictions to the processes needed to publish it.

How culturally responsive is the programme?

Students choose their artist (from what we term "established practice"). The choice is negotiated between student and teacher. The student then has to approach the artist to get an agreement to be interviewed. There is a range of artists selected - from Māori artists to Japanese designers. Often a student is choosing an art "idol" so there is no problem getting students engaged. However, there are points in the project when it seems like an uphill slog! This is an important part of the learning too - that there are times when you just have to put your head down and work hard.

What are the assessment opportunities?

Ongoing assessment is mostly based on qualitative data - student reflections and teacher observations and discussions with students. Evidence is gathered at an individual and a group level.

Students have to meet deadlines in order to get the magazine published on time.

I can see who is participating by going onto the project's [Facebook group](#). All but one student (who doesn't have a Facebook page) belongs to this group. This is a useful extension of the classroom (24/7 learning, which has its advantages, but needs to be appropriately managed so it doesn't take over). I capture screen grabs as evidence of progress.

Based on what was learned in 2012, 2013 assessment for qualifications (NCEA) has been more "shoehorned" into the standards than was initially hoped - so some tasks are set that are more specifically related to the demands of particular internal standards. This helps students prioritise and gather the evidence required for the standard.

This programme provides ample evidence of students developing key competencies, particularly managing self and relating to others. It relies on them actively using these competencies. Without them the programme simply would not work. They have deadlines they constantly have to meet. They have to set up and establish relationships with artists. They have to work as a team to produce the magazine, write the articles, design, maintain the Facebook page etc. It has been interesting to observe how well developed these competencies are in the students who are in their second year of the project in 2013, particularly when compared to those who have just entered it.

What evidence do you use to monitor effectiveness of the programme?

The students are emotionally engaged and motivated.

"As we spend so much time together in the art room I can gauge how students are responding to each other and to the group as a whole. My role is much more about facilitating than teaching per se. The students let me know when I'm doing this well, and when I'm not. They are pretty upfront and frank."

NCEA achievement by the students has met expectations (with a substantial proportion gaining merit endorsements for their NCEA certificates), but one of the key achievements is seen as the added "life skills" that the students develop that will be invaluable for their futures - such as project management, meeting deadlines (that cannot be extended), approaching artists for interviews, interacting with designers, printers etc.

On Fridays we share successes of the week and discuss goals and what has been achieved. As the programme has progressed we seem to be constantly raising the expectations and interestingly the students keep "stepping up to the challenges".

The staff in the programme meet every two weeks to reflect and plan. There has been increasing collaboration between the teachers involved in the programme. It's been interesting to observe some of the approaches by ' [Art Project](#)' students filtering out into the rest of the department. For example, the idea that if you're carrying out research about an artist you can email them and ask them about how and why they do things seems to be becoming common place, and has made a difference in the grades some students are getting.

Content

How does the content relate to your students' world?

The content is totally related to the students' world. They have choice in their selection of artists, what the design of the magazine will be like, the visuals, the articles etc. These choices reflect their world such as using street art etc.

The classroom increasingly feels like studio - a place where there is action - a magazine to produce! As the magazine is out in the public domain - and the digital copy can be accessed by people anywhere in the world, students become increasingly aware that it needs to be as good as they can possibly make it. The driver of quality is the public, not the desire for a merit or excellence grade.

How flexible is the content selection?

The magazine that is produced is the result of student input. It is theirs. They know their audience. They choose their own artists to research and the content that goes into the magazine. They know their audience.

"Over the holidays I looked after the [Facebook page](#) and I felt pretty good getting 40 or 50 views per posting. But once we handed it over to our student social media editor it started getting 300-400 views per

posting, and her best ever is well over 1000. That's a reflection of the students knowing their audience and taking ownership of connecting with them.

The students also maintain the magazine blog and control what content goes in there.

How does the content connect to students' learning in other subjects?

All the students do at least one "other" subject, with a couple doing two. Interestingly, quite a high proportion of them do dance as their other subject.

In 2012 the students did their English in the art studio, but we found that the temptation for them to slip into doing the art component of their project was often too hard to resist, to the detriment of their English.

In 2013 we've experimented with moving to a different classroom for most English lessons. By physically moving the students seem to find it easier to slip into using their "English brains" (despite the fact that the content of their learning and writing is related directly to the visual arts magazine).

Challenges for the programme

There is a challenge convincing parents (and some students) that this programme will meet what they perceive to be the demands of the NCEA qualifications. We've had a number of students who are initially keen, but when it comes time to get parents to sign off their involvement in the project the news comes back that they'd like their child to do a more conventional programme of study. "Mum says that I really should do"