Designing a senior secondary visual arts programme

Westland High School is a small (about 400 students) year 7 – 13 co-ed school in Hokitika.

Context

This visual arts programme was developed to give senior students in the visual arts the opportunity to access more art options than they could previously. Up until 2009 students opted into visual art at each senior year level. For some students this meant they had to make choices (such as visual arts or music at year 11 being offered on the same option line). Being a small rural school, option choices are limited. From the beginning of 2010 the timetable was opened up and visual art was offered on three of the six option lines, as the subject 'Senior Art'. All senior students are now in visual art classes made up of level 6, 7 and 8 curriculum learning levels.

This changed approach impacted on designing teaching and learning programmes. One size would no longer fit all. The students, particularly the year 13's, took some time adjusting to three year levels being in the same class.

As a teacher I had to reframe and rethink how I would create classroom conditions in which I could share the working space with students at different levels.

He Kākano was driving change in the school and I had also been interested in exploring Māori pedagogies and the concept of tuakana–teina relationships. So I decided to "have a go". I produced a handout which laid out the principles which would underline how the students and I would work together. This has worked amazingly well. Students understand they will be supported no matter what their level in visual arts classroom.

How does this programme fit into the three year progression in this arts subject?

The programme is designed to meet each student's individual needs. It starts with where each student is at and is not based on conventional year level classes. As three levels are working together in the same room students have been prepared to work at different levels. So year 13 students are more willing to be assessed by level 2 achievement standards than they used to be when they were with all in one class of year 13 students.

An approach I take with students at level 6 is somewhat constructivist - I encourage them to 'just make art'. Then I work with them and show them how to relate the work they make to the achievement standards. Over the next two years they seem to absorb these conversations and make sense of the link between their completed work and assessment, for themselves. I aim to help them know their own creative processes, and hopefully empower students to value what they do, and have confidence in their thinking and decision

making. Students mostly seem to be more metacognitive in their approach. I work hard to try and understand each student's creative process, rather than 'imposing' the NCEA process or my own ideas. They have access to their folio boards quite early in the year, and they experiment with laying out their own work.

Students are responding well to the programme, with most now becoming increasingly independent 'artists' by level three or year 13. Learning conversations with these students have changed, rather than students seeking direction and 'what to do', they are more interesting in explaining what they are doing, and talking about their options.

For level 8 students, it can be more challenging to be spread across three senior classes, as there are fewer of them. Being connected to the "energy" of each other in the art room is important. I'd like to possibly have an art 'camp' to support them to build connections with each other. However, no level 8 students have pulled out because they are in different classes from their peers, and they have the option of using their study periods instead of art periods to work and be closer to other level 8 art students (negotiated timetable).

There is no apparent transition from year to year. The transition is seamless; students seem to start working from where they left off the previous year with this approach. They recognise their own progression.

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

The school has been part of the He Kākano programme and has put a big emphasis on values and a common language for learning to raise the achievement of Māori students. The art department embodies these into its actions and approaches to teaching and learning, and for building a conducive learning culture. A strong emphasis on values underpins our classroom culture.

How does this programme contribute to raising achievement?

There is continuing dialogue in the school about Māori achievement and the arts programme puts an emphasis on ways to engage Māori students. The Arts are pivotal to bringing about change for these students. In 2009 the arts department led a cross-curricular school programme called: Nga toi Māori. This "learn by doing" approach was very successful in lifting awareness and putting Māori arts in the forefront of all students. This programme has evolved to be co-led by kaumatua and other Māori experts and leaders in the local community.

Where does this programme lead to for students?

The programme has led to a number of new pathways for our students. Getting excellence and scholarship results is now seen as achievable and a worthy aspiration for level 8 visual arts students. Students, who in the past didn't see the arts as an option for their futures, are now pursuing tertiary courses (and succeeding). They now believe they can compete with the best and get into courses that have limited entry. Three ex-students are presently participating at various stages of tertiary visual arts and design programmes at the Auckland University of Technology and Canterbury University.

For "at risk" students the visual arts programme, being available on three of the six timetable lines, means they can make choices to spend more time on art options. This has kept some students engaged, achieving, and attending school, something that is not always happening in their other subjects.

Conditions for learning

How flexible are the learning opportunities?

As the learning programme is personalised, each student often self selects their assessment options. For some students this might mean, in order to experience success in visual art, he/she might only do the internal achievement standard assessments. I also discuss with students what we think are their best options, so they are involved in the decision making. For more able students at year 11, flexibility to complete an additional external folio submission at level 2 is possible.

There are some challenges with school structures, when operating in this flexible way in only one department. Some of the students may not be ready to do an internal assessment when the school has set out a time-frame for internals to be done. So I have had to be quite dogged in arguing the case that students sit the internals when they are ready, and not to an external time-frame.

The role of ongoing formative assessment was pivotal to managing the clash between a student-centred programme and systems-centred school policies. Reporting is informed by formative results that are updated to summative achievement on the school learning management system early in term four. This enables assessment to continually reflect the progressive nature of students' ability to acquire and demonstrate skills in the visual arts. There seems to be a growing awareness of assessment for learning within the school.

How culturally responsive is the programme?

The flexibility of the programme allows all learners to have their own plan and goals. Hence there is choice at all levels of the curriculum and I encourage students to work at the appropriate level. This can mean year 11 students at level 6 may move more quickly into a level 7 programme. Conversely a year 13 student may be doing a course that is mostly level 7 and assessed with level 2 NCEA credits.

Time to deepen understanding, time for conceptual thinking to develop, and time to develop the metacognitive element of understanding contextual aspects of art making and linking personal visual arts practice to the wider world of contemporary artistic practice means that a full three year senior programme is still critical, even for gifted students.

What are the assessment opportunities?

As the students are on individualised programmes, they have taken more responsibility for their learning. They also understand that in order to move up levels on the curriculum there are prerequisites they must have to progress. So they are aware of the number of achievement standard credits they need to move to from one level to the next.

Also, as students are working at different paces through the programme, it has allowed some to just focus on the internal assessments and others to complete a level 7 programme over more than a year and achieve level 2 NCEA qualifications in visual arts. This has taken the pressure off some students, who might

have given up in the past. But now they are experiencing success in the visual arts.

Talented students are also able to extend themselves, particularly, curriculum level 7 (NCEA level 2), by completing an additional external assessment (folio submission) without having to commit to an additional option line of art. This is challenging in terms of time for students, but allows them to enter level 3 NCEA.

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

The effectiveness of this approach comes from student feedback, the engagement in the programme by students and the pathways the programme has opened up for many. Evidence is demonstrated in folio and visual diary work submissions, and the determination that students display to complete folios, and the pride they take in completing art work based on their own interests.

Monitoring assessment is a "work in progress" and one of the most difficult challenges for a teacher running an individualised programme. It takes a lot of managing – particularly for the external moderation of internally assessed achievement standards. However, the rewards are that our results have improved each year, and student feedback has shown that students understand what they are doing. This feedback has been reassuring.

Content

How does the content relate to your students' world?

In this area students are familiar with and understand landscape as it is a rural setting, for example. I try to broaden their horizons about art. I use different types of artistic models to broaden their understanding of what picture making is. I choose models that allow students to expand their experiences of visual art as we are quite isolated. I have also introduced a celebration of students' art work. Year 13 students exhibit all their portfolio work from level 6, 7 and 8 of the curriculum. This is available for other students and family/whānau to view. Students are immensely proud of their achievements and the celebration gives them an opportunity to reflect on their creative development over three years in the programme.

How flexible is the content selection?

As the visual arts programme is developed with students at the centre, the content choices are broad. As students move through the senior programme they make their own choices about context and content. However, there are some guidelines.

- At level 6 of the curriculum I have a theme from which the subject matter is based. We will use common artists' models at the start of the year but I will choose those by thinking about what artists this group of students might connect with. There are a range of models for the students to access. Examples include Taratoa and McGregor, who are our Māori artistic models. Taratoa has a very

urban, youth oriented, identity based element to his work that students easily relate to. McGregor's work uses recognisable symbolism like iPods and rifles, but also deals with metaphysical concepts from a Māori world view, and political concerns. Doze Green is an American 'street artist' turned 'fine artist', who's interest in cultural and political motifs depicting referencing graffiti techniques is useful. Franz Ackerman, a European artist, works with bold colours experimental spatial organisation.

- At level 7 students can choose their own subject matter, after an initial offering of looking at artists models that demonstrate elements of art making that they will need to understand as they develop their own art works during the year. I want them to understand the principles of art making, for example, what principles underpin post modernism or pop art.
- At level 8 students pick their own models and subject matter, in discussion with me. I find, by this stage, they are highly motivated, and very willing to learn.

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

For some students I connect with their other teachers to find out what they are interested in and how they are going. I try to use this knowledge to draw in students. For example, I discovered from one teacher how one student was becoming politically motivated and interested in political activism. So I used some images from Māori political protests to try to engage him.

In English, the HOD is exploring the use of the SOLO taxonomy with students, so I asked my students to use their learning about using SOLO in evaluating their visual art work and the quality of their writing for their artist research. This transfer from the English context to visual arts was easy for students.

What student data do you use to inform planning?

Although the numbers can be small I use data to compare against single year level classes – and plan to make programmes accessible and enabling for the students.

For some students the data becomes part of the conversation, particularly if I think they could be achieving better. The conversation is often around how we can tweak the programme to help them raise achievement (and curb the partying!). What is now happening is the students are not content with achievement – they are now excited about getting higher (merit and excellence). They are building expectations and getting to understand the VALUE of learning. Scholarships are starting to come.

What opportunities will there be to inquire into the impact of my teaching on students learning? (Teaching as Inquiry cycle).

I'm seeing endless possibilities in this model, this approach enables me to 'free up" from the appraisal paradigm that existed before. I see 'Teaching as Inquiry' as a way to be experimental and try new initiatives, and take risks. For example, I'm thinking about next year already, starting a virtual senior visual arts class (combining face-to-face and online learning), - taking what I have learned from video conferencing and knowledge building in art history, into the practical situation of a visual arts class. I'm interested in exploring what happens when I shift 'responsibility' around in the classroom, to support

students to learn to be independent, and take the pressure off the teacher to lead.

How are the key competencies (NZC) embedded into what is valued learning?

On reflection, the way I'm designing the senior visual arts programme and the conditions for learning in senior visual arts classes fits well with the recently developed 'self-audit framework' for the key competencies, and the framing ideas of initiative, connections and challenge.

The 'Kahurangi Rito Whakaaro Ako' diagram (link to diagram) - a culturally responsive model to value students and their ideas and to support a multi-level, multi course class, seems to enable the three key ideas driving the key competencies - initiative, connections, and challenge, to be activated. It creates a supported 'space' where students can be more confident to practice initiative and develop greater agency, a space that is bounded by the student, their class peers, the teacher, and personalised course content. Because students from the three senior year levels work side by side, it is easier for them to make their own learning connections, by seeing and experiencing continuity and coherence between learning and year levels in senior visual arts. Because learning in this visual arts class environment is personalised and inquiry based by necessity as much as design, students are challenged to engage, contribute and participate with each other and the teacher to learn.

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