

ST NINIAN'S HIGH SCHOOL



KIRKINTILLOCH

School Policy No.16

INTER-DISCIPLINARY LEARNING

BACKGROUND

Interdisciplinary learning is an important element within Curriculum for Excellence. It constitutes one of the four contexts for learning in Building the Curriculum 3.

- Life and ethos of the school as a community
- Curriculum areas and subjects
- Interdisciplinary learning
- Opportunities for personal achievement

All of these contexts are crucial if the potential of children and young people as successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens is to be fully developed.

The curriculum should include space for learning beyond subject boundaries, so that children and young people can make connections between different areas of learning.

WHAT IS INTERDISCIPLINARY LEARNING?

Interdisciplinary learning:

- enables teachers and learners to make connections across learning through exploring clear and relevant links across the curriculum
- supports the use and application of what has been taught and learned in new and different ways
- provides opportunities for deepening learning, for example through answering big questions, exploring an issue, solving problems or completing a final project
- can take the form of individual one-off projects or longer courses of study
- is planned around clear purposes
- is based upon experiences and outcomes drawn from different curriculum areas or subjects within them
- ensures progression in skills and in knowledge and understanding
- can provide opportunities for mixed stage learning which is interest based.

There are two broad types of interdisciplinary learning which, in practice, often overlap.

1. Learning planned to develop awareness and understanding of the connections and differences across subject areas and disciplines. This can be through the knowledge and skill content, the ways of working, thinking and arguing or the particular perspective of a subject or discipline.
2. Using learning from different subjects and disciplines to explore a theme or an issue, meet a challenge, solve a problem or complete a final project. This can be achieved by providing a context that is real and relevant, to the learners, the school and its community.

WHY INTERDISCIPLINARY LEARNING?

“It is important that all learners are given appropriate opportunities to develop their thinking skills. These skills can be developed across a range of contexts including through more practical or applied learning opportunities”

(BtC4 p 11) www.LTScotland.org.uk August 2010

The advantages of interdisciplinary learning are similar to those of other high quality and effective learning and teaching situations:

- learners are motivated and involved; they demonstrate an inquisitive attitude.
- learners develop confidence in facing challenges, both intellectual and practical.
- learning is connected and directly related to real life experiences.
- learners work individually and collaboratively.
- it allows more in-depth exploration/understanding of topics, issues and problems within and across subject areas and disciplines.
- it makes learners want to understand the different curricular areas in greater depth.
- interdisciplinary learning is beneficial to learners as it contributes to the development of high order thinking skills and critical thinking.

Learners experience of IDL:

- Teachers, children and others should be aware of the role and contributions of the disciplines, or curriculum areas, within the interdisciplinary learning. They should be careful that learning does not become ‘lost’ within the theme or context.
- The context for IDL should enable children to deepen, explore, test out and challenge their knowledge and understanding from different curriculum areas, thus developing higher-order thinking skills. IDL also enables children to consolidate and extend their learning, making concepts or knowledge from different curriculum areas more relevant and meaningful. For example, teaching probability in mathematics co-ordinated with science work on DNA and genetics.
- Children have opportunities for personalisation and choice within IDL. This can include prior learning, areas of interest, different ways of demonstrating learning, finding different examples and other higher-order skills such as comparing and contrasting the contribution of different disciplines to the IDL. Pupil choice is set within the context of the teacher’s planning. This ‘freedom within a framework’ is planned to ensure appropriate progression and continuity in learning, avoiding complete free choice, which could put learners progress at risk.

- Activities meet the varying learning needs of children.

PLANNING FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY LEARNING

The planning of interdisciplinary learning should provide a clear focus for learning and exploring relevant connections across learning. Interdisciplinary learning requires collaborative planning and will involve:

- classes, year groups or departments working together to agree the focus Es and Os within our agreed progression
- capitalising on the contexts and connections which enhance learning within curriculum areas and subjects
- the input and ideas of children and young people to help them formulate the ‘big questions’
- working with partners

Planning should also:

- reflect the principles of Curriculum for Excellence
- build on prior learning, experiences and contexts to take into account progression and coherence
- clearly relate the planned learning to the experiences and outcomes
- clearly identify learning intentions, learning experiences, success criteria and the evidence of learning required as part of the assessment process
- make the connections across different subject areas and disciplines explicitly and frequently
- ensure that tasks are suitably challenging
- ensure that a suitable range of learning and teaching approaches are identified whilst leaving space and opportunity to respond to children’s learning and their proposals for further learning

At St. Ninian's, we have taken early steps to extend the breadth of inter-disciplinary approaches to our curriculum, e.g:

- Discussions between departments to identify and eliminate double coverage of content.
- Discussions between departments to identify and bring an element of consistency to the teaching of common skills.
- Scotland's Heroes IDL is a themed learning experience covering both third and fourth level experiences and outcomes spanning five curricular areas. The Scottish context provides all S3 pupils with the opportunity to not only develop their awareness of Scotland but also provides relevant, challenging and enjoyable learning developing a number of transferable skills.
- Joint department projects such as those between Art and Business Education, Home Economics and Spanish, RE and Home Economics.
- S1 Food Challenge. Home Economics, Business Education, LCR, Maths and Art co-operate to develop, cost, package, advertise and market a product.
- Intervention strategies in English and discussions with other departments relating to common formative assessment techniques.
- S2 Money Week – throughout the week each department introduced an element of money management and financial education into its S2 lessons.
(appended)

Updated July 2025