
The Case for Alternative Creative Curricula, and What We Did at Stanley Park

JACQUIE THOMAS

ABSTRACT This article outlines reasons for creating the Excellent Futures Curriculum at Stanley Park High School, Carshalton, the strengths of the curriculum, and its subsequent development.

Foreword

When I first started teaching I don't think I had ever heard of vocabulary such as 'measuring,' 'tracking,' 'evidence' and suchlike being associated with education. Only in spheres way outside my tiny realm of the classroom did this lexis exist. I was an English teacher after all. How could these terms possibly have any connection with the nuanced work of unlocking students' creativity and developing their understanding of the world and their ability to think and work together to decipher the meaning of life as derived from texts? When I did my PGCE back in the mid-1980s, English teaching was about developing a repertoire of ideas to get the students writing stories; being imaginative; unlocking their ideas; releasing their creative potential. There was time to do this, and lesson content wasn't dictated by the demands of the GCSE examination which had just come into being.

For me, teaching English wasn't only about investigating texts, but was also about discovering the world together with the students. The novel was a launch pad for investigations that could take you on all kind of tangents – often ones that weren't in any prescribed departmental scheme of work. Ultimately, this is why I became a teacher. Initially, all I wanted to do at the age of 21 was see the world, and so I sought teaching English overseas as a means of doing so. Yet, when I discovered the wonders of being able to discuss that very world with young people, and further their understanding of it, a new journey of

discovery came about. This was my road trip and it was fun, thought-provoking and a territory that needed to be traversed with relish.

Twenty years on and I found myself teaching at Stanley Park High School, Carshalton. We were in the final years of the National Strategies and already the pervasive abundance of all those initiatives, with the honourable intentions that they originally had (packages to promote Assessment for Learning, Thinking Skills and ideas for developing Literacy Across the Curriculum – to name but a few) had become overwhelming. The methodologies proposed were taken as gospel and ultimately became so formulaic that it seemed we were faced with a future of robotic-like approaches to teaching. The ‘starter’, the ‘middle’ and the ‘plenary’ became the disciples of the lesson. We began to try to categorise what made an ‘outstanding’ lesson, hopelessly, and students dutifully copied learning objectives into their books without a further thought for what these meant. So many initiatives were thrown at teachers that it became impossible to know what to do with them all. And of course, this was the time of SATS examinations and the ‘levels’ associated with them. We were already on the downward slope of categorising individuals into numbers according to subjective sets of criterion-based descriptors, and Ofsted were the wolves howling in the near distance – ready to devour us for lunch on Day 1 of the new ‘2-day’ inspection if our students did not match up to the expected grades in their pre-determined graphs. Well, you know how the story went after that...

The Blossoming of the Excellent Futures Curriculum

It takes a head teacher with a great deal of backbone and tenacity to work through the turbulent times that David Taylor spoke of in his article about Stanley Park High (*FORUM*, 59(3), 359-370). David is unique in his ability to focus on the future and stick with what is right by the students despite the increasing pressure for conformity. I joined the school in 2005 and shortly after that we developed the Excellent Futures Curriculum (EFC), working on the principle that every child matters (if any readers recall that mantra?) and that every child should have a choice to create a pathway of learning that is best for them. Our evidence for changing the status quo in Years 7 and 8 was based on observation of learning and interviews with students. We found that, as David puts it, ‘our traditional ways of teaching weren’t working. Students were disengaged and unhappy.’ It was time to do something about it.

In these research-centred times our approach was probably not the most evidence-driven way of making a complete change to a curriculum, but we did have a breadth of understanding about how the children in our context learnt, what their aspirations were and where we wanted to take them. Of course, there were examples of other skills-based pedagogy that existed at the time, such as the RSA Opening Minds Curriculum, and other schools running similar, successful integrated curricula in pockets of the country, such as the Tartan Curriculum at Bishops Park College (described in more detail in David’s article)

and the Shared Time Curriculum at Stantonbury Campus. Our exploring also took us to observe other models, such as the enquiry-based learning of the coalition of central schools in the USA, and the holistic curriculum of Hellerup Skole in Denmark (discussed by Max Hope in *FORUM*, 59(3), 411-422).

Regardless of how we intended to shape this new learning package for the students, however, our initial observations told us the following:

1. Students needed to learn how to learn: to acquire the skills to be able to access the demands of the GCSE courses.
2. They needed to develop a range of competences that could prepare them for a better future (an 'Excellent Future' at that). This would be a future in which all of those twenty-first-century skills that we speak of so often could be at their fingertips. It does not just take a string of qualifications, as we all know, to be successful in life. Although qualifications are, naturally, the major force behind social mobility, we are already discovering that building businesses and making money is as much about networking and communicating as it is about anything else.
3. Somehow, we needed to rid our students of the passivity that they had come to adopt – possibly a result of being placed in a non-selective school when half of their primary class mates had moved on to the perceivably 'better' (grammar) school up the road.
4. We wanted them to learn in practical ways that they would view as relevant to them; to think, make, build, design, write, create – but with outcomes that moved beyond the plethora of different-coloured exercise books that they had hitherto filled with a range of 'learning' activities that were done, marked and, for the most part, forgotten.

We created a bespoke competence-based curriculum that centred around the development of enquiry-based learning, with each unit of work culminating in a practical, meaningful outcome – of a type which suited our students' interests and gave them the opportunity to move on to Year 9, and then to GCSE, with the confidence to be able to tackle the pressures of the examination system, but also with the character to negotiate the world that waited for them. Over the years, these units have been fully refined and adapted in order to engage students in what may now be termed as *deep learning*, where a range of integrated, subject-based topics are investigated. We ran street carnivals; had students off timetable for a day to simulate life in a different country; put on plays (written by the students) which involved every one of them (not just the keen thespians); facilitated 'apprentice-like' business tasks way before Alan Sugar came onto the TV screen; and ran trips – many of them – such as the yearly visit to the battlefields in Ypres. This too was long before Michael Gove ever proposed this as a vital learning activity.

Nor was subject content completely forsaken – as is often the perception of critics regarding integrated learning curricula. Master classes led by subject specialists were run, with subject content to the fore. Our curriculum may not have been as refined and thorough at the outset as it is today, but students were

learning about the world in practical ways, and they were remembering what they had been taught. This had not always previously been the case. Above all, students were now engaged more; they were enjoying school, they were no longer passive receivers of education but were becoming active participants. They were happy. Likewise – and this was meaningful and refreshing for me as a long-serving practitioner – we were once again able to do those things which I had come into teaching for and which I mentioned earlier: unlock students' ideas and release their creative potential. Soon after our new curriculum began to be implemented we changed the school slogan to: *Igniting a Passion for Learning*. This claim was woven into all future learning development plans and it became the breath of the building, inspiring all the learning behaviours throughout the school.

How Alternative Pedagogy Can Enhance Learning for All

As expected, the EFC has undergone many a change in its first decade. These include adaptations in subject balance; choice of 'skills' to be assessed; modes of assessment; patterns of timetabling; and leadership priorities. A total of approximately 60 different staff have taught it over this time. Yet, it works. In the last few years a project-based learning approach was added to the mix in order to refine the programme and make it the success that it now is with students, parents and the community.

Naturally, developing a new way of working was not without its troubles. We started with one year group and a small group of practitioners with a range of subject specialisms and teaching experience. It was a challenge for colleagues to teach outside of their subject specialism and to facilitate learning experiences in small teams, in open-plan classrooms. Staff had to step outside their comfort zone and there was shared accountability for the lesson planning and activities. It was, and still is, a team effort, and this is not always easy for teachers who are used to working within the confines of their own classroom. But what a truly immersive and authentic form of professional development it is to plan together with colleagues and regularly team-teach. There are the nuances of different personalities and styles to mould together, a range of subject understanding and pedagogical approaches to unravel, and in the open-plan studio spaces there is nowhere to hide – you have to be constantly on your toes and ready to respond to both students and colleagues alike. But when it works, it is a model of collaborative professional practice of the highest order.

What has become apparent is that this way of working has to be learnt, and it naturally takes time for the different trios of teachers to settle into a working pattern (that also serves as an exemplary working model of collaboration for the students). This is a skill in itself. Currently, there is a lot of educational patter around skills being taught explicitly, and many skills- and project-based curricula are criticised as puerile and unnecessary. Acquisition of knowledge appears to be the driving force for education and the key to success for all youngsters. Of course, this cannot be disputed in a system where

knowledge recall and application is the basis of the examination system. Knowledge is 'power' after all, and there is nothing more self-assertive than being able to hold your own in different spheres of life by expressing your 'knowledge' on a range of topics. Haven't I already expressed how my love of teaching came about as a product of being able to learn about the world and develop knowledge with young people? And yet, I do not believe that 'knowledge' and 'skills' are mutually incompatible.

I read recently about the ambitious plans of Matt Hood for the newly formed Institute for Teaching. In response to the new standards for teachers' professional development, he interestingly argues that we need to treat teaching like a performance profession.

Teaching techniques are rehearsed and learnt rather than tried out 'live' in a class as so often happens. He is thereby suggesting that subject knowledge is not sufficient to be a successful teacher. We need to learn the skills to be proficient in our profession. So too, then, do students need some guidance in the proficiency of dealing with the complexities of living and all that this encompasses. Confidence, creativity and communication are key. These were, and still are, the overarching aims of the EFC. And they do need to be taught. Not all young people acquire these skills through natural osmosis. Giving students time to develop them does make a difference.

And, so to the Future...

Interestingly, despite our initial observations and the research acquired from other models that underpinned elements of the EFC, ultimately it was our own deep-seated conviction of what was right and what would work for our students that drove the programme forward. It is true that no unit of measure was attached to these values. Yet these are values that so many educators hold today but are fearful of putting into practice. They are values that encapsulate the notion that true democratic education takes place only if the curriculum model allows it. It is very sad to know that so many school leaders feel bound by the shackles of school performance tables. In a recent discussion that proposes a radical review of Ofsted, Tom Sherrington wrote that 'schools are driven to perverse short-term behaviours around curriculum' and that '[h]ead teachers have a gun to their stomach on outcomes and they have a gun to their head on curriculum breadth'. This is only too true. And yet, at no point has the EFC ever adversely affected the results at KS4 or KS5. Even if one were to reduce subjects at KS4 (Stanley Park High hasn't), there is no reason why KS3 need not be adapted in a creative manner to suit the learning needs of the student community. I experienced three Ofsted inspections while working at Stanley Park High. At no point did the inspectors ever criticise this model. On the contrary, it was praised and lauded as an exemplary transition curriculum that engaged the students and served them well.

Within these times of turbulence educators not only need to pull together to find ways of challenging some of the unpliable pieces of policy that are

restricting learning opportunities for so many young people. They could also be collectively bold enough to keep lighting those beacons of the school curriculum that allow for adaptability, innovation and creation. In recent times, it seems that when schools face the uncertainties that follow a dip in attainment, the first things they abandon are those examples of practice that appear to be unusual or different from the safety net of traditional schooling. Yet there is little evidence to suggest that these practices are the cause of any reduction in progress or attainment at the end of Year 11. It is the case that non-traditional modes of teaching and learning are less easy to measure. The fact that the inspector monitoring the teaching and learning of the EFC in the school's last Ofsted visit could not find evidence of progress in any exercise books was an initial cause for concern. How could she possibly measure progress? Only when she came to talk with pupils – armed with their portfolios of work – was she able to make sense of the learning that had occurred over time, and the depth of both knowledge and skills that the students were able to explain to her. After all, is not listening to their stories and their unique understanding of their learning just as valid? What more credible evidence exists than that which comes out of the very mouths of the young people whom we serve? Forgive me for my ever-present naivety in all of this, but what better way is there of being 'measured'?

JACQUIE THOMAS was a senior leader at Stanley Park High School, Carshalton, for 12 years. Prior to this, she worked as a teaching and learning consultant, and has taught in a range of schools in London and internationally. She has been teaching and training young people and adults for the past 30 years and has an interest in authentic learning practices, teacher education and creative curriculum design. She continues to teach English and also supports schools and associations with aspects of coaching and mentoring for leadership and learning. *Correspondence:* jacthomas@talktalk.net