partnerships for schools

This case study looks at how The Chalfonts Community College has used technology creatively to embed cultural learning across the whole curriculum.

Key project information

School: The Chalfonts Community College
Age range: 11-18
No. of students: 1,780
Location: Suburban
School type: Foundation School
Specialisms: Technology College status and a Training School
Free school meals: 5 per cent
Ofsted: Good and Outstanding in places, Autumn 2007
Local authority: Buckinghamshire

Culture and cultural learning as drivers for curriculum design

Background

The Chalfonts Community College is the largest secondary school in Buckinghamshire and twelve years ago became the first school in the county to have broadband internet access. Through the creative use of technology Chalfonts has embedded cultural learning across the whole curriculum by developing a new model of digital media delivery that sits within the current framework of GCSE Art and Design. The learnings from this process have also driven innovation in the teaching of other subjects.

The success of the venture can be attributed to the commitment shown by the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and external support of the exploration of co-design, co-construction and co-delivery. Culture and cultural learning is being further developed through the school's technology college status, with a highly skilled teacher developing course content using industry standard technology.

Pupils and teachers actively use the school's virtual learning environment (VLE) and the school's investment in staff training and a full time creative and media technician supports and sustains this inventive practice.

The college is also involved in a Creative Partnerships programme, working with arts organisation Creative Junction[1] on a three-year change school[2] programme that aims to support the creative development of the whole school.

Project description

Four years ago, Chalfonts introduced a new GCSE for Art and Design using only digital media. The course is designed to empower pupils to question, understand and create the digital media they encounter while providing opportunities for shared and personalised learning through the use of technology.

As a result, pupils are increasingly directing their own learning experiences, working through the curriculum to develop their own progression routes into the creative industries in line with their interests and talents. Students who have completed this course are moving onto some of the best university courses in graphics, visual communication and animation.

What started off as a digital media GCSE Art and Design course for twenty pupils is now an over-subscribed course running for two classes per year group. Students taking the course achieve higher than predicted GCSE grades with results often exceeding 10% above the national average for GCSE Art. The course appeals to a wide spectrum of pupils of all abilities. Pupils who are not naturally gifted in painting and drawing can apply themselves to the

Culture and cultural learning as drivers for curriculum design

creative use of technology with relative ease, making them willing participants in the learning process.

Learners have increased autonomy and control over their own learning and are confident users of technology in their own right. One of the outcomes of the course has been that several otherwise disengaged boys have gained A*-C grades in Digital Art and no other pass grades.

Greg Hodgson, Senior Leader and Course Tutor said: "I have seen students join the course completely resistant to learning and in 18 months seen incredible transitions from highly challenging individuals to highly engaged and independent learners. By allowing and positively promoting web-based learning via VLE and other tutorial sites, as well as hand-holding in class, students have discovered previously undeveloped pathways into learning."

Chalfonts uses the Digital Arts GCSE course to help students to tap into previously unleashed creativity and teach them valuable skills such as critical thinking and understanding of the digital age in which they live and will work. One project involved the production of games and generated significant skills development.

"At first they just wanted to talk about games in general but as they began to unravel the structure - storyboarding techniques, the purpose of rules, plot lines, narratives, layer design, prototyping and iterative processes - the student's understanding of both games and

design really took hold." said Greg Hodgson.

Pupils are taught how to use and manipulate various technology packages and in the later stages of the course are encouraged to a higher level of thinking and skills development using creative exercises like 'Photoshop Tennis', in which the teacher sends out an image, students then manipulate it in some way and pass it on through an online visual forum.

Following on from this, they then learn how to create interactive art and Flash games. The process of moving from imaging to animation and then to a level of interaction means that the skills used by students can often be more advanced than those of the teacher, so the teacher works as a facilitator within the process.

Chalfonts still recognises the value of traditional GCSE Art and Design practice providing darkroom facilities and presenting artwork throughout the school.

Supporting creativity

The college is forward looking and fosters relationships with the creative industries to support and develop opportunities for pupils with creative talents. One pupil has created several highly successful Flash games and his website has achieved over 40 million hits. With facilitation by the school and independent learning this able and quiet student has presented his games at the Adobe Education Leaders Conference in San Francisco.

The GCSE Digital Arts course has become so embedded into Chalfont's culture that they are now introducing A-level Photography. This course focuses on photography, video and animation, and enables pupils to continue to develop the skills they have learnt at GCSE. Plans are also underway to incorporate a successful extra-curricular games design workshop into a 14-19 Creative and Media Diploma.

Work-based learning opportunities are delivered through visits to organisations in the creative

Culture and cultural learning as drivers for curriculum design

industries and through virtual learning, with A-level students taking virtual visits to artists' studios via web-based video conferences. Task-based exercises are developed and facilitated between creative practitioners, teachers and students in a collaborative approach. This model provides many more opportunities for learners to interact with creative industry professionals than conventional visits would allow, providing significant access, cost and time benefits to all partners.

There are plans for this model to be delivered throughout the school and curriculum so that pupils can access a full variety of professionals as part of their work-based learning programme.

Information Communications Technology (ICT) is enabling teachers to communicate with pupils in many ways. The headteacher engages with pupils through face-to-face contact; virtual contact through video messaging and blogging; and through the VLE. For example, a typical address at assembly might be streamed directly to classrooms giving students the opportunity to respond to the subject matter through the VLE, making communication more open and democratic.

Other subject areas are benefiting from the use of ICT too:

- Both English and Media studies use Bluetooth technology to allow learners and teachers to exchange ideas through mobile phones.

- Mobiles are also used to capture visual images in science lessons.

- Podcasting is used to enhance modern languages and blogging is used to good effect in media studies.

Cultural learning is perceived to have more opportunity to flourish through the new secondary National Curriculum (Big Picture); for example, the school has developed a project-based 'Independent Learning Programme'. This sees the curriculum suspended for 10 days in two-day blocks over an academic year and has enabled all Year 8 pupils to have access to podcasting, flash interactivity, stop-frame animation and video production.
Many of the college's projects produce new media content and are enhanced with creative input from graphic

designers, radio producers, visual artists, animators and filmmakers, which is funded through Creative Junction and Creative Partnerships. Seven Creative Junction practitioners have also worked in tandem with seven members of staff to help develop their digital media skills and work towards the school's ambition of 'exciting and engaging pupils and teachers through new media.'

Key lessons learned

- Recruit and retain staff who are receptive, willing and able to use technology.

- Investing in CPD and key staff appointments supports sustainability. Teaching and learning approaches, curriculum content and personalised learning are dependent on staff being open to and confident about acquiring new pedagogy and skills. This requires a planned approach to change management.

- Inviting creative partners, like graphic designers, animators and film makers at conceptual and early development stage is beneficial in terms of co-design, co-construction and co-delivery of the curriculum. A broader, relevant curriculum is often the result of this approach. Sharing the planning and thinking with pupils is beneficial too.

- Making use of creative ICT as part of the School Improvement Plan with SMART (Specific; Measurable; Agreed; Realistic; Timebound) targets is key. For example, 'ten teachers will confidently use podcasting with Key Stage three by the end of the year.'

Culture and cultural learning as drivers for curriculum design

Conditions for success

- Find an advocate for the development of digital media within the school and support them to learn via industry and creative practice.

- Champion the cause at every level and ensure that SLT track the developments and promote digital media at every opportunity to pupils, staff and parents.

- Invest in the hardware and software for the delivery of the creative subjects. Offer training by industry professionals to stimulate new practice.

- Let students take control of the media, encourage staff to learn from them and with them within the conventional parameters of good teaching practice.

- Give staff time to play and experiment. Encourage them to take managed risks and feedback to the SLT.

- Use the web to celebrate work to as a wide an audience as possible.

Things to look out for

- Not all examiners necessarily have the skills, confidence and knowledge to examine digital media effectively. This can be challenging and careful navigation is required to ensure pupils are not penalised. Examiners/moderators need to find new approaches to mark and grade accordingly, while schools and learners should find new and innovative ways to provide evidence. Talk examiners through the process and help them understand the work.

- Challenge the status quo of what is expected, but work within existing parameters, recognising that this is developmental and not established practice.

- Risk taking from the very top is essential for a school to transform. Celebrate exploration and experimentation and engage in positive discussions about failure and mistakes. Look to and beyond industry for vision and support but most of all put student thinking at the heart of school developments.

Key contact

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References

1. Creative Junction work in partnership with young people, learning settings and the creative and cultural sector to develop and advocate creative learning and to connect work across sectors.

2. Change Schools are schools whose development is supported by Creativity Culture and