

# **A Connected Curriculum: Working across Subject Boundaries in Music and Drama**

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## **Abstract**

The new *Successful Futures* curriculum in Wales places a strong emphasis on cross-curricular working, defining six broad 'Areas of Learning and Experience' (AoLE), one of which is expressive arts. Initial Teacher Education (ITE) practitioners at Cardiff Metropolitan University are engaged in a project entitled *A Connected Curriculum*, which aims to explore the challenges and opportunities of working within these AoLEs. This article details the early stages of delivery of collaborative work between music and drama PGCE lecturers and their students, in which the possibilities for deep connections to be made between the subject knowledge and skills of both subjects are explored. This work, while prompted by curriculum developments in Wales, has relevance for teacher educators with an interest in cross-curricular teaching and learning in all countries.

**Keywords:** PGCE; Music; Drama; Cross-Curricular; Interdisciplinary; Successful Futures; Donaldson

## **Rationale**

As those involved in education in Wales digest the implications of the *Successful Futures* report (Donaldson, 2015), and pioneer schools begin the process of creating a new curriculum that delivers its aims (Wales Government, 2017), it is incumbent on those responsible for the delivery of Initial Teacher Education in Wales to gain a fuller understanding of the implications and issues related to cross-curricular learning and teaching in order that the next generation of teachers in Wales possess the potential to use and understand these pedagogies to the full.

However, the ideals of collaboration and cross-curricular working are equally applicable to educators in other countries. As Hattie (201, p.41) says:

the most powerful [planning] is when teachers work together to develop plans, develop common understandings of what is worth teaching, collaborate on understanding their beliefs of challenge and progress, and work together to evaluate the impact of their planning on student outcomes.

With this in mind, four PGCE secondary subject leaders from Cardiff Metropolitan University set up an overarching project entitled *A Connected Curriculum* to explore the ways that pairs of subjects could join together to explore cross-curricular ways of working. After an initial pilot project between English and Welsh in the academic year 2015-16, a four-subject project in 2016-17 covered the following groupings:

- English and Welsh
- English and drama
- drama and music

Each pairing took a slightly different approach to its cross-curricular project, in order that a wider variety of pedagogical issues and approaches could be evaluated at the end of the year. This paper summarises the methods and findings of the drama/music pairing.

## Literature Review

### The case for the arts in education

Donaldson (2015) makes it clear in his report, *Successful Futures*, that he sees the breaking-down of existing subject boundaries as an important aspect of creating the ideal learning experience for pupils:

One of the defining features of twenty-first century education will be the capacity to make connections and transfer knowledge and understanding across different contexts in order to address unfamiliar problems (p.68)

Additionally, while some have expressed concerns at the marginalisation of the arts in education (Fautley & Savage, 2011 p. 165), Donaldson (2015, p43-4) makes it clear that the skills encapsulated in the expressive arts are a vitally important part of his vision for education in Wales in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With all this in mind, it would seem high time to take a wider and more ambitious view of what pupils can take from their experiences of the expressive arts in school – perhaps finally dispelling some of the issues of pupils' perceptions that keep the arts as 'niche' subject in many schools. On the music side, Wright (2008) identified the need to challenge music teachers' adherence to the *habitus* created by their own musical and educational background to avoid pupils seeing 'school' music and 'real' music as two damagingly different entities. Drama, not a separate subject in the National Curriculum on its introduction in 1987, has consequently faced questions about the nature of the place it occupies in the curriculum as a whole (Fleming, 2017, pp.27-40).

## Teacher Identities

Nearly 40 years ago, Bernstein (1971) cautioned about the 'socialisation [of teachers] into subject loyalty', meaning that 'any attempt to weaken or change classification strength may be felt as a threat to one's identity.' In music in particular, questions of identity are frequently an issue for teachers as they wrestle with the 'musician vs. teacher' identity question. Pellegrino (2009 pp.46-50) for example gives a brief account of a very heated discussion between Bernard (2005), Roberts (2007), Bouij (2007), Dolloff (2007) and Stephens (2007) in which the issue of musician identity versus teacher identity is debated robustly. This is an issue that has been explored in more detail in the USA than the UK, which may well be a product of music *education* specialisation (or 'majoring') at undergraduate level in the US, compared to the tendency in the UK for students to study 'pure' music as undergraduates and then add the educational content afterwards in the form of a PGCE. In the UK, educationalists such as Swanwick (1988) have long campaigned for the concept of teachers of the expressive arts as 'musicians [or whichever kind of practitioner is relevant to the subject] in the classroom'. With the widespread adoption of this idea in classrooms with the assistance of pedagogies such as Musical Futures (Green, 2002), could the next challenge for teachers of the expressive arts be the creation of a more fluid subject identity? Fautley and Savage (2011) point out that 'the identity of a teacher in the secondary school is often bound up very strongly within an individual subject specialism', and that 'many teachers have constructed their identities from within the boundaries of their subject'. Sachs (2005) suggests that 'teacher identity is not something that is fixed nor is it imposed; rather it is negotiated through experience and the sense that is made of that experience.' With a potential imminent change of teacher identity being heralded by Donaldson (2015), surely it is a vital part of the work of ITE departments to 'negotiate' and 'make sense' of this with their students. To teachers who identify strongly with a single 'subject', Donaldson (2015) says that 'if powerful connections within and between Areas of Learning and Experience can be found they are likely to improve and reinforce learning in the constituent disciplines.' (p.68)

## Creativity and freedom to learn: challenges for new teachers

Donaldson (2015, p. 29) makes it clear that pupils need to be 'ambitious and capable learners, ready to learn throughout their lives' which implies that they should have experiences which allow them to take control of the way in which they learn. A blurring of the boundaries between existing subjects would seem to be an ideal way to give pupils more freedom in how they approach creative tasks, but in their proposed pedagogy for cross-curricular teaching and learning in the arts, Fautley and Savage (2011 p.53) point out that 'one of the implications of teaching and learning in this fashion is that for the teachers it involves being reactive... rather than prescriptive.' They encourage teachers to 'value the natural emergence of cross

curricular links', (ibid. p.95) as opposed to trying to specify how and when these links should manifest themselves. This presents real challenges for any teacher, let alone a student teacher, and once again indicates an area that needs to be addressed by those training them. Can student teachers, most of whom are still keenly aware of the need to establish their norms with pupils, and 'keep control' of their classes, be given the tools to enable them to empower pupils to take control of the learning?

## **Method**

The drama/music project was designed as an opportunity for students to co-devise a cross-curricular learning experience. Fautley and Savage (2011, p. 117) suggest the use of 'interdisciplinary' as a preferred term more suited to arts practitioners, but 'cross-curricular' was used throughout this work, and perhaps is more effective at reminding students that they are in the project to contribute to their curriculum development and delivery skills. Initial lecturer discussions focused on the following necessities for the project:

1. To make explicit the links between this work and the Donaldson report (2015) and the kind of learning we think it implies for the future
2. To ensure that students were able to collaborate effectively without subject boundaries/misunderstandings or any other awkwardness hampering their work
3. Closely related to (1), to give students the confidence to overcome the subject-based worries identified by Bernstein (1971) and elaborated more recently by Fautley and Savage (2011) and to thereby move onto the 'territory' of the other subject without fear
4. To provide students with tools to understand how the separate curriculum aims of music and drama, and their nationally-mandated assessment criteria can coexist
5. To provide opportunities for students to work creatively in the way that we hoped their pupils might in future, with lecturers modelling the sort of 'reactive teaching' (Fautley and Savage, 2011 p. 53) that values the natural emergence of cross-curricular links rather than imposing them (ibid. p. 95)
6. To build in opportunities for deep reflection and evaluation

Preparatory work for the project involved the creation of a booklet for students that helped achieve aims 1 and 4, as well as providing a space for recording their creative work and their evaluative thoughts. The booklet summarised the relevant ideas of Donaldson (2015) as well as providing the KS3 curriculum content and level descriptors for music (DCELLS, 2008) and related statements and descriptors for drama devised by the Arts Council of England (2003) in the absence of a National Curriculum document for the subject.

To help with aims 2 and 3, students and staff involved with the project were invited to an informal meeting in the students' union in which they were given their project booklets and encouraged to get to know one another socially and share their thoughts on their own and one another's subjects. This took place two weeks before the main project day. To complement the social and 'getting to know you' aspects of the session, as an introduction and stimulus for discussion around the project itself, students were provided with the following quote:

...the Areas of Learning and Experience in the proposed curriculum should not be seen as distinct entities or timetabled subject areas, nor should the Cross-curriculum Responsibilities and wider skills be developed in isolation. Instead they should all be seen as promoting connections and unity within and between the Areas of Learning and Experience. Artificial connections would render the exercise meaningless, but if powerful connections within and between Areas of Learning and Experience can be found they are likely to improve and reinforce learning in the constituent disciplines. Pedagogical approaches that allow connections to be made via common questions, concepts or skills should be explored within and across Areas of Learning and Experience. (Donaldson, 2015, p.68)

They were then posed the following questions for informal discussion:

1. In light of the quotation from Donaldson (2015), what 'powerful connections' can be made between drama and music (e.g. curriculum content, skills, pedagogical approaches, approaches to the creative process, life-long learning and career prospects)?
2. In what capacity and to what end have you experienced/observed drama and music brought together in the past (both in and out of education)?
3. What might be the challenges and opportunities of cross-curricular planning and teaching in music and drama within education?
4. Is your school already piloting an aspect of the new curriculum in Wales? Any initial views, insights or critical reflections that you can share?

Students were then encouraged to reflect on their conversations and to go into their placement schools and investigate how the 'other' subject was delivered, and also try to find out the views of staff in their schools about cross-curricular working.

To collect baseline data about students' views, they were encouraged to complete a short survey before the project day itself. This consisted of the following statements, with students indicating their level of agreement with them:

- I have confidence in planning cross-curricular activities between my subject and drama/music
- I have confidence in teaching another subject within the expressive arts AoLE

- I have secure knowledge of connections and unities between my subject and drama/music

The structure of the main project day was as follows:

**1000 - Skills workshops:** music students develop their drama skills, and vice-versa.

**1115 - Setting the Task:** discussion in which we set out the task for the day, what it entails and how to be successful.

**1130 - Time to Devise:** Time for students to plan and prepare their workshop.

**1315 - Workshop Delivery:** Students deliver their workshops

**1430 - Round-up:** Quick discussion about the day, what we have learned and what we can take away into our own classrooms.

The first session was designed to address aim 3 above. While ITE staff were aware of the links between their subjects, they identified student subject confidence as a potential issue for effective working, and addressed this by providing each subject class with a 'skills' session delivered by the 'other' subject lecturer. The key to these sessions was that they accessed the 'new' subject via a stimulus that was closely associated with students' specialist subjects.

Music students developed their physical theatre skills using a piece of music as a stimulus, and melodrama as the drama concept. After being introduced to the principles of melodrama, the music students created one-minute silent scenes while the music was played. It was particularly noticeable that music students were instinctively aware of the need to synchronise their actions with the structural points of the music, moving in time with the beat and reflecting the tempo of the music in their gestures. It was clear some of the existing skills of the musicians translated across to the requirements of the task successfully.

Drama students used GarageBand software by Apple to compose the music to underscore a piece of silent video provided by the lecturer. It was immediately obvious that drama students already possessed the understanding and creative 'tools' to access this task, and that the eight musical elements outlined in the National Curriculum (structure, silence, duration, dynamics, pitch, pace, timbre and texture) (DCELLS, 2008) were concepts with direct relevance to the creation of effective drama work. Students understood after the skills session in music that new technology makes the subject accessible to pupils without 'traditional' instrumental skills and without the ability to read or write in staff notation, something that is not necessarily widely understood by those whose experience of music education was more than ten years ago.

Following the skills sessions, students were put into mixed subject groups and given the following task:

- Taking on board all that you have experienced this morning, you have two hours (including a working lunch) to plan a cross-curricular workshop;
- Length: 30 minutes;
- Devise a workshop (aimed at a specific Key Stage/year group) which culminates in the creation of a YouTube video;
- The video must be the result of a holistic devising process, where 'pupils' are considering and creating both arts forms simultaneously;
- Consider how digital media can be incorporated to enhance the learning experience and finished product;
- Remember, you are aiming to make powerful (not artificial) connections between your subjects.

Your session should:

- Achieve a sense of unity and meaningful connection between the two subject skill sets;
- Successfully develop the subject skills of both music and drama at the appropriate level;
- Contribute to developing pupils' skills in relation to the four core purposes (where relevant).

Students were then given open-ended time (including lunch time) and the free use of all the specialist music and drama spaces and equipment to devise their learning experience. In order to try and maximise students' capacity to consider the creation of rich connections between their subjects, they were not required to write formal lesson plans.

Davies et al. (2013) have found evidence that 'making connections between ... 'informal' spaces, other out-of-school locations and the school environment increase[s] engagement, motivation and hence creative outcomes.' With this in mind, a request was made to open a connecting door between the specialist music and drama spaces that was usually kept locked, necessitating a long walk from one subject area to another. The opening of this door, and the availability of 'informal' spaces nearby allowed all students the free use, within a small geographical area, of:

- A small computer room with music-specific PC software and world percussion instruments
- A larger computer room with music-specific Mac software as well as a performing space, interactive whiteboard and Apple TV
- A mock-up music classroom with 'standard' classroom instruments, interactive whiteboard and Apple TV
- A music practice room with piano
- A music practice room without piano
- Open corridor spaces
- A large drama studio with lighting rig and projector

- A small drama room and costume store
- A small drama studio with portable lighting rig and projector
- A coffee shop
- A canteen area
- An outdoor grass area with seating
- Ten iPads with music-specific software

This approach was intended to model to students the importance of:

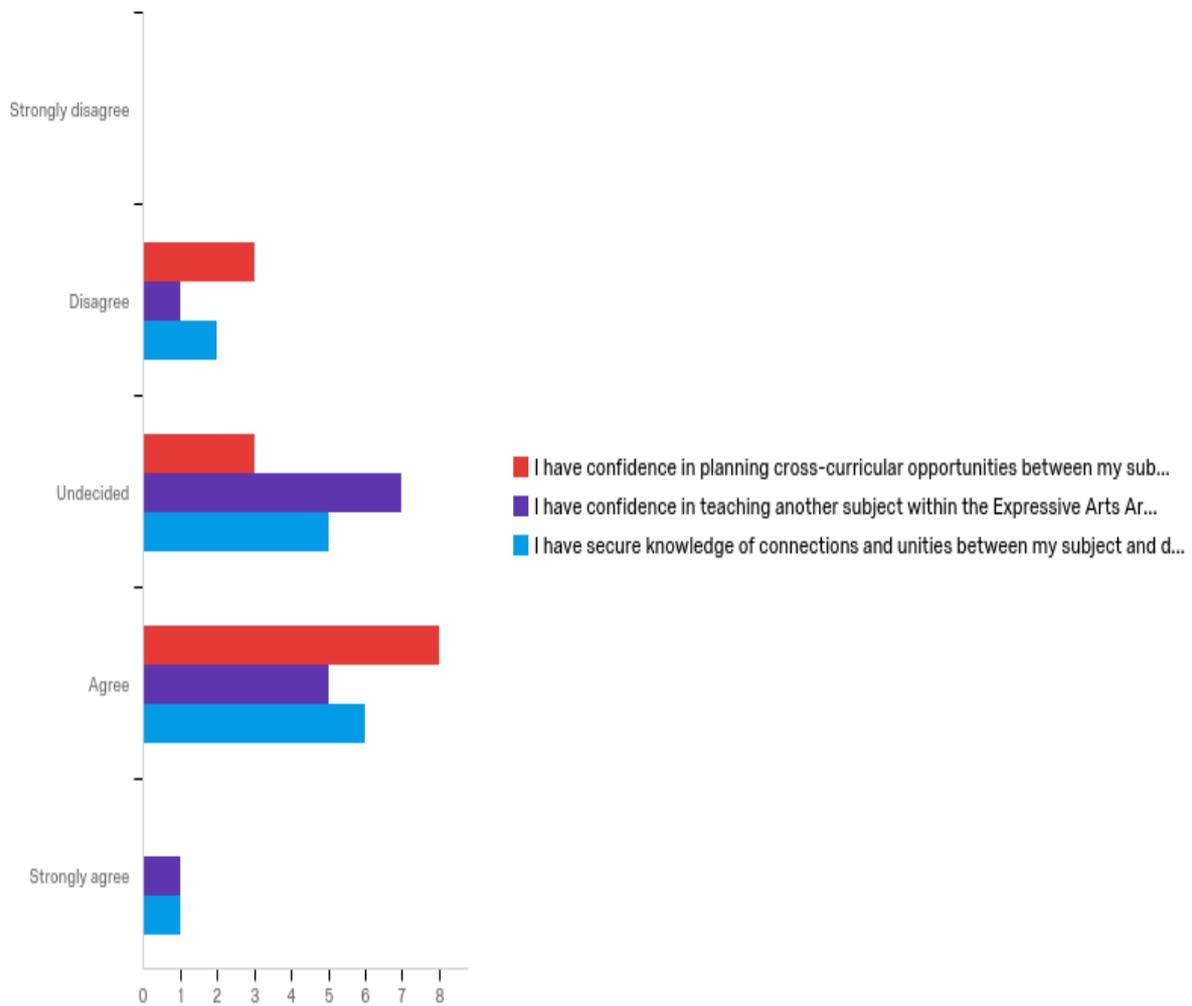
- Having the confidence to use tools and space, including non-formal space such as the coffee shop, fully and innovatively (Davies et al., 2013)
- Creating an environment where ‘the natural emergence of cross-curricular links’ (Fautley and Savage, 2011 p. 95) can happen
- Providing sufficient time for creativity without specifying restrictively how it should be used, in the hope of seeing ‘the increased interest and commitment that time can give to the value of creative learning. (Jeffrey, 2006)

The lecturers circulated during the devising time, modelling a facilitative approach in which students were asked questions, encouraged and provided with resources and suggestions, while reminding students of the aims of the project without imposing limits on their creative ideas.

Once the devising time was up, each group of students delivered their cross-curricular learning experience to a ‘class’ made up of the other students plus some additional final year undergraduate students from a joint honours degree in educational studies and drama (non-QTS). The day concluded with a discussion which revisited the opening questions from the informal session and evaluated the extent to which the students’ devised activities achieved what they set out to do. Students were asked to consider the extent to which they felt it was realistic to try and explore this practice further in their own schools. After the day, they were given another short survey to complete, to allow us to compare students’ responses before and after the project.

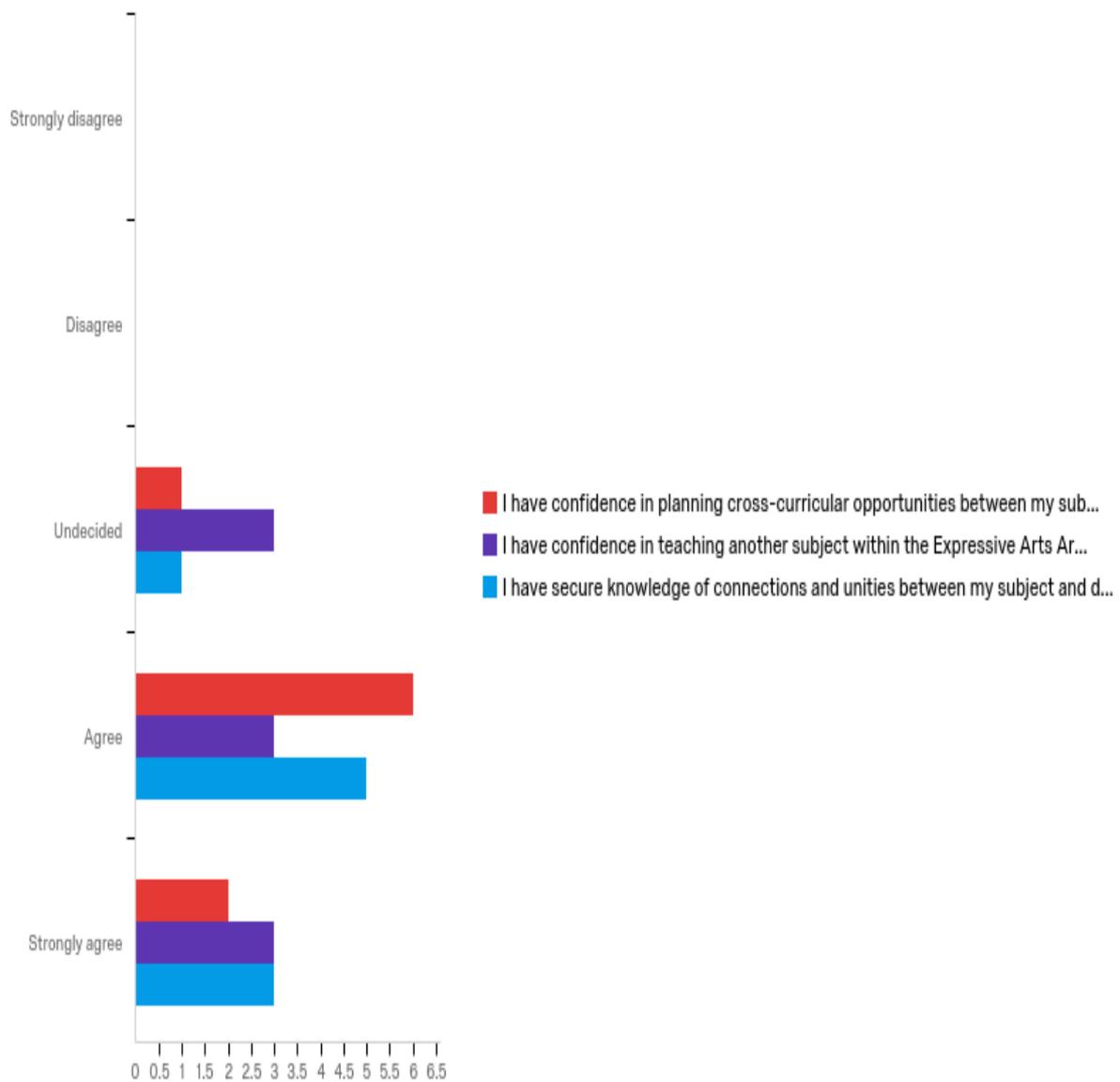
A month later, the same students reconvened for an hour’s discussion about their reflections on the project once they had some time to digest what had happened. Two weeks after this, a focus group of students from all the *Connected Curriculum* projects met for a wide-ranging discussion about the project as a whole.

## Findings Baseline vs. Final Data



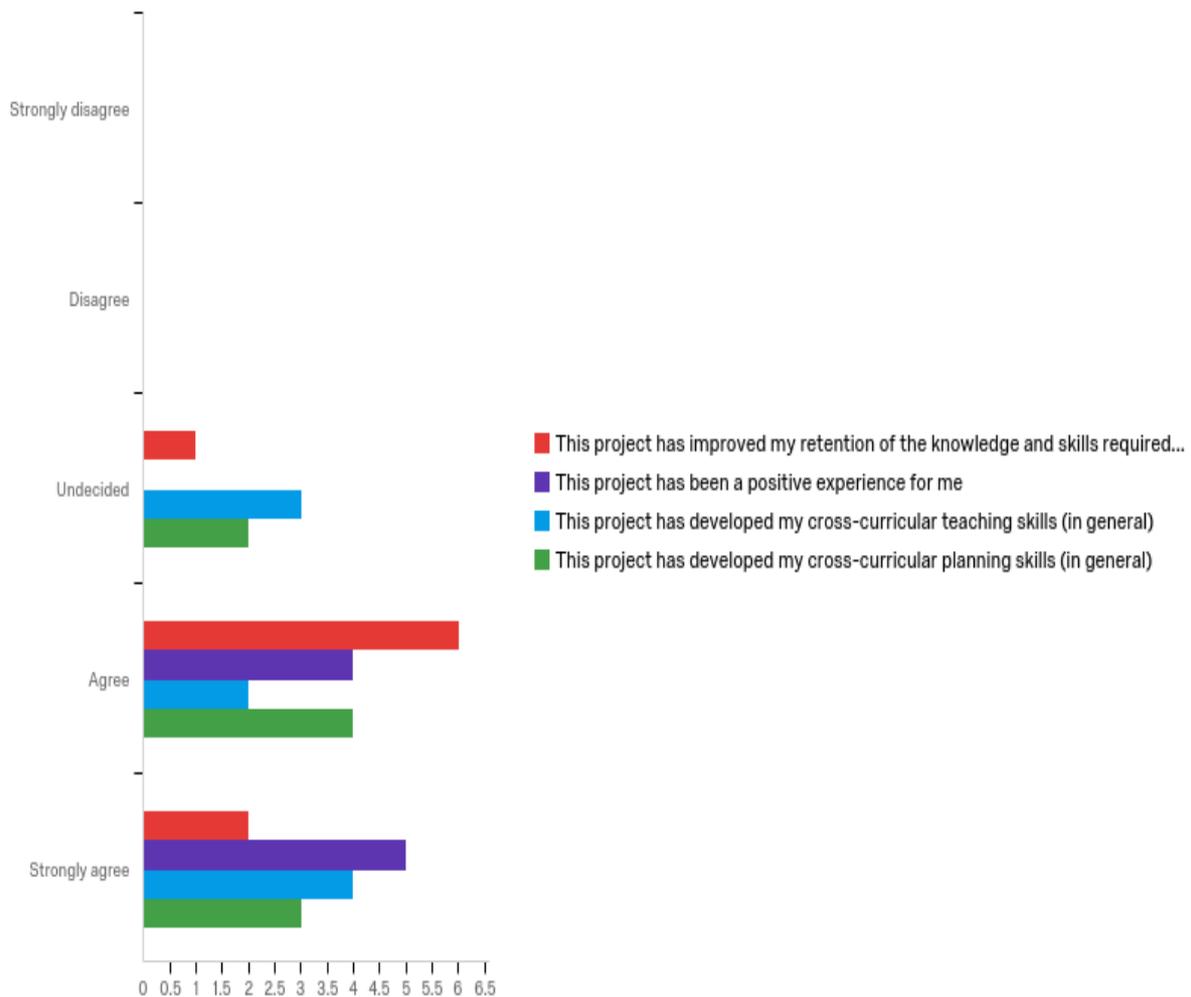
**Table 1:** Results of student confidence survey prior to delivery of the cross-curricular day.

As can be seen in Table 1, baseline data indicated that students had a moderate level of confidence related to the planning, teaching and unifying of their two subjects. There were, as predicted by the staff delivering the project, clear concerns from the students about teaching the specific subject skills of the 'other' subject.



**Table 2:** Results of student confidence survey after delivery of the cross-curricular day.

Table 2 shows the responses to the same questions after the day had taken place. While there were slightly fewer responses to the second survey than the first (9 responses compared with 14), the responses that were received show a marked increase in confidence in all three areas surveyed. While some issues related to teaching unfamiliar subject skills remained, there was a clear move towards agreeing with the statements. A closer look at the individual responses showed that the most negative respondents to the first survey were *not* the ones who had ‘disappeared’ by the time of the second survey.



**Table 3:** Results of student survey about the value of the project to them.

As can be seen in Table 3, students also responded positively to questions related to the value of the project for them. While all students who responded considered the project a positive experience, some felt there was room for further development of their skills before they could feel that they were definitely more competent in planning and teaching in a cross-curricular way.

### Student Views

A number of positive views were expressed by the participants, of which this one is representative:

I liked the link between the two subjects and the initial morning session really showed the positive impact of using both within my subject. It really made me aware of how easy it can be to link the two subjects and that it would have a really huge impact on pupils' engagement, creativity and could also be a 'hook' to get them interested in the subject. (Student comment)

When asked for areas for improvement, a number of comments related to the need to spend more time on this area of practice to gain the fullest benefit from it.

One interesting comment which appeared more than once related to the idea of devising a whole unit of work, rather than a small-scale 'lesson'. This seemed an ambitious idea, but further drilling into the individual comments revealed an interesting insight into what students had been doing in their devising time:

The most useful/enjoyable part of the session for me was the discussion that we had in our group that led us to create the outline of a whole scheme of work that we were all very excited about. I think it would've been more useful for each group to present their SoW ideas to the other groups instead of facilitating workshops for our peers to take part in. (Student comment)

This suggests that, during the open-ended devising time, students had entered a state of creative 'flow' as defined by Custodero (2005), with this survey comment being a clear indicator that students had spontaneously engaged in 'expansion' of their learning experience – one of Custodero's *challenge monitoring indicators*, and the one specifically identified as the one where 'the creative impulse is most recognisable.' (Custodero, 2005 p.195).

Another comment showed that students were able to identify that they had been given the space and freedom to be creative, which would seem to make it more likely that they would be able to recreate such conditions in their own teaching:

It felt free enough for us to be creative and structured enough with regards to group setting so that it wasn't an awkward integration. By allowing us to 'go our own way' you opened up a door for collaborative creation and in doing so we actually explored more than I felt we might have if the sessions were too prescriptive. (Student comment)

### **Staff Observations**

Positive observations by staff included the fact that students were clearly engaged and enthused by the opportunity to work on subject skills from the 'other' subject. This was, as hoped, a very positive way to start the project day, and helped to dispel confidence issues and set the tone for a 'fun' and 'different' experience. It could be argued that students who are expected to create this sort of experience for pupils should experience it themselves from time to time on the PGCE course. A second positive observation was that students used their open-ended devising time

creatively and intensively, producing some interesting and innovative ideas to deliver to their peers.

An important observation which came from the delivery of the devised work was a distinct difference in approach depending on whether the participants were in 'teacher' or 'pupil' role. As teachers, their instinct was to control the learning experience to a degree that tended to 'manage out' opportunities for pupils to explore the cross-curricular nature of the learning in a truly free and natural way. The act of creation (e.g. composition, devising a drama piece or indeed the task set for the PGCE students in this project) is at its root a problem-solving activity, and the beauty of a cross-curricular approach is that it allows pupils a greater number of possible 'routes' to the final product. Student teachers, still concerned with issues of 'management' and 'control' had a tendency to specify the route for their learners, telling them, for example, that they had five minutes to work on the music component, after which they would have five minutes to work on the drama component of what they were being asked to do. When in the role of pupils, the very same students disregarded these impositions and tended to learn in a more natural and cross-curricular way.

It was interesting to observe more than one group of students create a learning experience that had the potential to be genuinely cross-curricular, and then put obstacles in the way of this with the imposition of too much management and control, and yet to behave in the opposite way when in the role of pupils. When this was raised in the final discussion, it was equally interesting to note that students seemed entirely unaware of this issue. For PGCE teaching staff, this suggests that there is room for greater promotion of the skill of metacognition so that students can 'step back' and consider what promotes creative learning and what obstructs it, looking at process above product and having the confidence to devolve greater decision-making power to their pupils.

## **Next Steps**

The *Connected Curriculum* project looks forward to the proposed new curriculum environment in Wales as well as being of interest and relevance to educators from elsewhere with an interest in cross-curricular collaboration, teaching and learning, as well as creativity more generally. At Cardiff Metropolitan University, the project continues to evolve, and has now become a fixed part of the existing PGCE secondary programmes in several subjects. Its findings will inform the new generation of PGCE courses that accompany the introduction of the new curriculum in Wales. Outside Wales, projects like this help define the purpose of university-led provision in ITE, providing an 'environment beyond the school' to enhance the creativity of student teachers in the same way that Davies et al. (2013) propose this as being valuable for pupils. Additionally, linked research is planned in which the

impact of the pioneering of the new expressive arts AoLE proposed by Donaldson (2015) on pupils is investigated, especially those in receipt of free school meals.

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