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Embedding the Global Dimension into Secondary Initial Teacher Training through the use of virtual schools

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This article reports on the progress of an action research project designed to embed the Global Dimension into Secondary Initial Teacher Education at the Cass School of Education, University of East London. Conceived in 2007, the project built on the recognised strengths of our provision – the ‘virtual schools’ initiative and our relations with our partnership schools, both of which were recognised by Ofsted in their 2008 and 2010 inspections of the work of the Secondary Initial Teacher Education at UEL. The project sought to weave the Global Dimension around the framework of virtual schools using our strong partnership with school-based colleagues to support this initiative. This article reports on the progress the project has made in its second year informed by an analysis of school-based partnership staff and trainee evaluations examining the outcomes of the project in its first year.

Keywords: The Global Dimension; Partnership; Virtual Schools; Blended Learning; Cross-Curricular; Global Citizenship; Action Research.

Introduction

The authors identified school-based mentors whose subject disciplines included citizenship and who would be willing to take part in the project. Acting as facilitators, their brief was to support each of 14 ‘virtual schools’ whose focus was to develop cross-curricular resources, activities, lesson plans and schemes of work around the theme ‘The Global Dimension’. Through the provision of core lectures, workshops and planning days, the project culminated in a ‘Festival of Ideas’ in which trainee teachers exhibited

their teaching materials at the Cass School of Education at the end of their academic year. This ongoing curriculum development continues to address a number of research objectives, namely:

1. To evaluate the usefulness of the Global Dimension as a context through which to deliver cross-curricular teaching within ITE Secondary Provision.
2. To assess the efficacy of virtual schools in embedding the Global Dimension within the framework of ITE secondary provision at UEL.
3. To evaluate the quality of resources produced by participating trainee teachers.

While at this stage the researchers are still involved in analysing the project, the article offers some tentative findings and some lessons that have emerged from the work as a result of data gathered through a series of questionnaires, evaluation forms and an end-of-year survey with trainee teachers involved in the project.

Rationale and development of the Virtual Schools project

The UEL Virtual Schools project started in 2007/08 with Secondary PGCE trainees and now involves all Secondary ITE trainees (PGCE and GTP). Trainees are allocated on the first day of their training programme to one of 14 ‘virtual’ secondary schools, each with its own set of background information and data, and each school is given ‘space’ in which ideas, issues and problems can be discussed face-to-face and on an e-learning platform (a wiki). Each school is ‘staffed’ by approximately 15–18 trainees taken from the 11 secondary specialist subjects offered at UEL. This is seen as a way of addressing another common issue for Secondary ITE providers, ie that secondary

trainees value their specialist subject sessions highly, sometimes viewing the General Professional Studies (GPS) sessions as a less important and less relevant part of their training. Trainee evaluations have routinely revealed that subject sessions are more highly rated than GPS sessions. In September 2007 the current Professional Standards were introduced, with a focus on three new aspects: the children's agenda (ECM), personalised learning and new professionalism including teamwork and collaboration needed to be reflected in the UEL GPS programme for 2007/08 onwards. In revising the GPS sessions, it was decided that there should be an attempt to embed these themes coherently throughout the GPS programme, using the Virtual Schools project as the mechanism for achieving this. The new National Curriculum frameworks were implemented from September 2008 with an emphasis on cross-curricular collaboration. The Global Dimensions project was identified as a way of further developing dialogue between different subject groups and pedagogies, with the virtual schools providing a 'realistic' context for this work. All Secondary ITE trainees sit together with other members of their 'school' in GPS sessions. Pre, in-session and post-session tasks are explored by the Virtual School staff group (trainees) working collaboratively both face-to-face and online. Participants have engaged in the project as a form of role play, and the virtual schools provide a safe place for trainees to explore their future roles and take risks. The trainees think and act in role as teachers in a 'pretend' school, developing collaboratively the language of the professionals they are training to become.

The Global Dimensions project

Prior to introducing the project to trainees, the project team identified ten mentors and other interested practitioners from schools who would be willing to take part in the development of this project. The aim was that this group be involved in developing a briefing for cross-curricular tasks incorporating the Global Dimension into ITE and that they would provide feedback for subsequent development of the resource bank. The work of this group would be facilitated through a series of meetings supported by a wiki that was developed during the year. It was also hoped that this would support the work of these mentors, offering up 'pairs of hands' to develop materials. It was

decided that these goals could be best served by the utilisation of the Virtual Schools project which involved all trainees and was already embedded in our ITE programmes.

Of the seven National Curriculum 'cross-curriculum dimensions', the 'Global Dimension and Sustainability' offers a rich source of active learning opportunities linked with citizenship education. The second year of the project was launched with our trainees at a core session on Global Citizenship in October 2009. This was supported by sections on this topic within each virtual school. The introduction made clear that young people in schools are, potentially, eager recipients of the eight concepts of the Global Dimension (Conflict Resolution, Social Justice, Values and Perceptions, Sustainable Development, Interdependence, Human Rights, Diversity and Global Citizenship). At the core session, trainee teachers in each virtual school picked one of four themes ('Children's Rights and Responsibilities', 'Conflict Resolution', 'Sustainability' and 'Identities'). These themes would inform work on the virtual schools for the year and underpin a 'Global Dimensions Festival' to be held in June 2010. A subsequent briefing in December 2009 required them to decide:

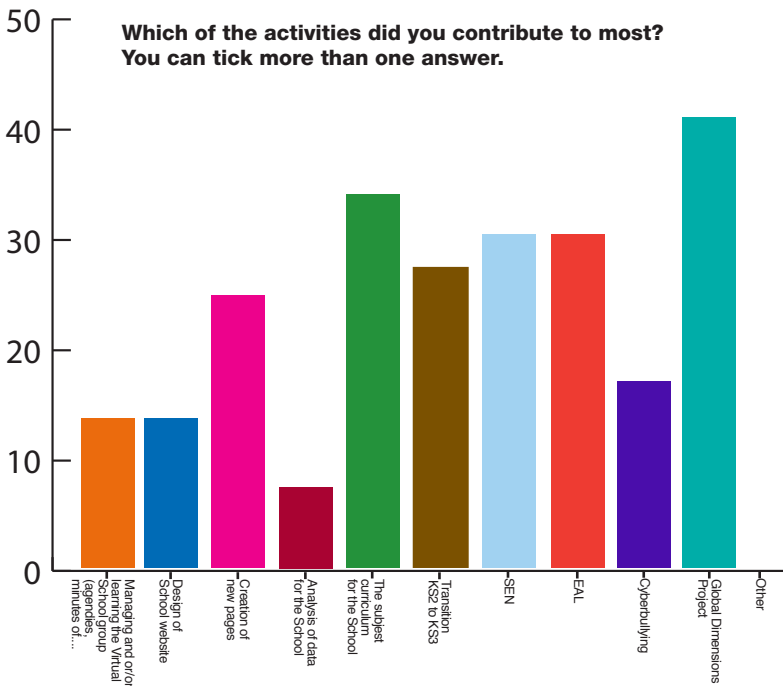
- What research needs to be done (and by when) by individual virtual school members in their placement schools to explore how the global dimensions looked at in October are delivered?
- What sorts of activities will pupils be doing during the five-hour planned day?
- What resources will you create to support your activities?
- Who will be doing the activities? (eg whole of KS3, just Year 7 or Year 8 or Year 9?)
- How will the day be run? (eg Timetable suspended? Normal timetable and theme delivered through subject lessons? etc)
- Human resources? (eg types of collaboration between teaching teams, etc)
- Physical resources for you to use on 11 February (eg laptops; flipchart and pens, DVD, book, magazine; scissors, glue, ICT lab etc).

Each virtual school worked collaboratively on these questions between December 2009 and February 2010. During February a whole day was allocated for all virtual schools to work together in preparation for the ‘festival’ to be held in June. Each virtual school was allocated a base-classroom in which they worked with one of the ten citizenship teachers acting as advisers to the groups and brought in from our partnership schools. Partnership teachers along with some members of the secondary teacher education department acted as guides and facilitators throughout the day. Each school was allocated a budget of £50 for any resources they required. On a June morning on the final day of the PGCE academic year (the afternoon of which comprised a celebratory barbecue with live Caribbean music) each virtual school presented the activities, resources, lesson plans and schemes of work to their colleagues. The event started with a brief presentation by each school in the main lecture hall followed by an exhibition of their work in different classrooms within the Cass School of Education.

Evaluation

Evaluation of the project is ongoing and has taken a variety of forms. Questionnaires comprising 20 statements related to the Global Dimension were issued to trainees at the start, midpoint and end of the project. Evaluation forms were completed by 131 trainees directly after the festival event. Peer assessment took place, with each virtual school assessing the exhibited work of their colleagues. The forms used in this peer assessment process were also deployed by members of the secondary team as they visited the exhibition stands. Finally, 57 trainee teachers filled out an extensive questionnaire via ‘survey monkey’. This article presents some of the initial findings and will be used to inform the development of this project as it moves into its third year in September 2011.

The following chart gives an indication of the value that many trainee teachers placed on their involvement with this project in relation to other virtual school activities (the Global Dimensions project is represented by the last column on the right of the chart):



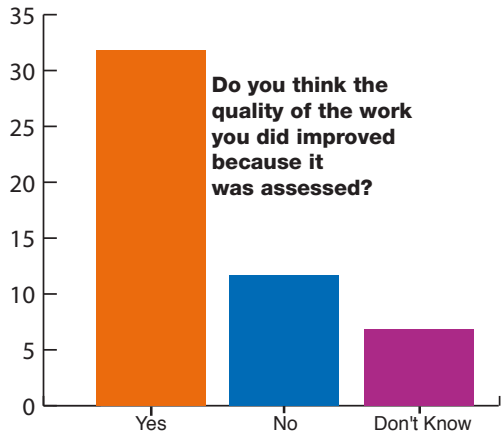
Data from 131 trainee teachers' evaluations of the Global Dimensions project reveal a number of areas of knowledge that trainee teachers thought worthwhile. These can be summarised as:

- greater awareness in all concepts related to the Global Dimension
- experience of working in teams of different teachers that bears similarity to what takes place in real schools
- to learn to think and plan cross-curricular lessons
- to understand the relationships between their subjects and the Global Dimension
- to further develop the social skills needed when working in large organisations like schools
- forging an understanding of how much planning is required for off-timetable days
- to be introduced to a range of new pedagogies taken from other subject disciplines
- the opportunity to make 'important' resources (ie that relate to social welfare/efficacy)
- developing greater understanding of the benefits of 'less didactic teaching'
- knowledge of what economic/social/environmental sustainability is
- developing the confidence to work with a new subject for the first time
- significant opportunities to gain many of the QTS standards
- more confidence in producing classroom-based resources in relatively short times
- understanding the logistics of planning a whole-school event.

These are powerful arguments for supporting the project into its third year. One should not, however, underestimate the dissonances and tensions that trainee teachers experience when juggling the values they are encouraged to take up by their tutors and lecturers at university with the reality of classroom practice. These tensions can be exacerbated during the training year when required to work with colleagues from different subject areas. However, data from this study showed that trainee teachers valued both the medium (the virtual schools) and the vehicle (the Global Dimensions project) during their training year:

I think it was a good way in getting different PGCE students together so that they were not confined to their own subject group. I think the virtual schools gave us all the opportunity to communicate online and it also meant that we did not have to arrange meetings when we were on teaching practice. Therefore the interaction and communication online was excellent in making sure tasks were completed and also ensured that we communicated effectively and worked as a team. (PGCE trainee no 11)

Changes made to the project in light of student evaluations at the end of the first year of the project led to the introduction of formal assessment of individual and whole-school contributions to the Global Dimensions project in its second year. The following table would indicate that this has been deemed worthwhile by most trainee teachers:



While some trainees expressed agitation in light of the burden of assessment, evaluations revealed that assessment made considerable difference to both the experiences of trainee teachers and the outcomes of their labours:

As the work is assessed it is not something that can be walked away from, so any issues with colleagues or any contributions have to be talked about, and negotiation early on in the project was vital. (PGCE trainee no 27)

However, assessing collaborative work at any level can pose difficulties for the assessor and the assessed, and while a variety of assessment strategies were deployed this year for the first time, further improvements will need to be carefully thought through in light of some criticism trainees voiced:

Knowing that they [trainee teachers] will be assessed for the contributions that they will make towards the Virtual School project makes some people do much more work than they should. And if everybody wants to do everything, within the team, problems may arise.
(PGCE trainee no 51)

Particular emphasis was placed on the role that the project had in forging linkages with other colleagues and developing managerial skills when working on collaborative projects:



While it was inevitably the case that tensions emerged with some trainee teachers during the course of the year, nevertheless, overall feedback from trainees revealed a number of positive experiences when working with other colleagues:

Our Virtual group was divided into groups for some activities and almost all had the responsibility to to lead with some activity and report to the sub-group, followed by discussions before the eventual final decisions.
(PGCE trainee no 37)

Depending on how much you wanted to get involved, you could lead or manage or contribute as you wanted. Most of the students appeared to be glad if someone wanted to take on extra work. (PGCE trainee no 5)

Some areas did [offer opportunities], particularly in terms of getting to know new people and working with a variety of people and, even if you do not always agree with something, developing a professional understanding of how to approach it, as this may occur in your career and it is important to keep a professional demeanour. (PGCE trainee no 44)

It is certainly not the intention of this article to present a rose-tinted view of this project. While most trainee teachers recognised and praised the opportunities that such a project presented to them during their training year, a minority failed to 'buy in' to how their involvement would benefit them as professional teachers. For us as action researchers, while we were interested in their comments we are also interested in the critical views of those that saw the benefits of the project as a whole and therefore could offer constructive criticism that we can take forward into the development of the project next year. The following points represent a summary of both sets of critics:

- More time required if quality of outcome is to increase.
- Space to store resources produced during the February preparation day.
- More background information on key terms associated with the Global Dimension.
- Size of groups to be reduced – allowing more focused and productive work from all members.
- Stronger interaction from facilitators when some trainees off-task.
- Show examples of projects from previous year.
- Tighter scaffolding of the tasks during the course of the year.
- GTP trainee teachers to be allocated their own dedicated virtual school.
- Project should be done at UEL before school placements.

- Do whole project in a week before placements in schools.
- Make sure all members of the virtual schools are involved – ie tighten up assessment criteria so that full/part/no engagement is recognised.
- Involve partnership teachers in all phases of the project and present at all meetings with virtual schools.
- Global Dimensions project would be more effective if it was a 'real school activity', ie taking the project into schools or bringing schools into UEL.

Conclusion: moving the project forward

As stated in the introduction, the authors of this article are still currently analysing the data that this action research project has generated. This is taking place at a time when all institutions similar to ours are planning the delivery of courses for the next academic year. All bullet points are being carefully considered, with a particular interest being generated around the last point (ie bringing schools into UEL). During the course of the 2010/11 academic year we intend to capitalise on the developments around the London 2012 Games. We will do this by using this global event to offer a context within which to explore global dimensions. This will be done through consideration of the legacy commitments associated with London 2012. The project will be enhanced in this iteration by the integration of an expectation that the trainee teachers will develop and deliver a session around the contextualised global dimension with school students from our partner schools. These activities could be launched in a series of workshops for local pupils and their teachers, raising the aspirations of Newham-based pupils for a university education at UEL. Trainees could be supported by outside agencies (eg charities, non-governmental organisations etc) with whom the virtual schools would build relationships over the preceding months. Specialist Geography and Citizenship teachers and consultants could liaise with the virtual schools throughout the project. The resources generated could be collated into a 'Global Dimensions and Social Enterprise Resource Pack' and distributed to all participating schools for future use within their own departments. This is our current thinking at the time of writing this article.

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