Language, Culture and Identity: Using rights as a theme for cross-curricular collaboration between Citizenship and Modern Languages teachers

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Abstract

This paper considers how two teacher educators have approached the embedding of the principles of children's rights into our teacher education programme at London Metropolitan University. We will explore how the focus of a Rights Respecting Teacher Education Programme has impacted on our own practice through a cross-curricular collaboration with training teachers.

This collaboration involved Citizenship and Modern Languages student teachers preparing and delivering workshops on human rights to approximately one hundred 16-17 year olds at a London secondary school in January 2010. We will explore the reasons for engaging in this particular collaboration, before analysing some of the difficulties the student teachers found. We argue that strong association by student teachers with a subject 'identity' is inevitable given the nature of the English National Curriculum and is desirable. However, as we suggest, this can have a detrimental impact on meaningful collaboration and the learning experience of young people when teachers are unable to recognise the different contributions that other subject areas can make in areas such as human rights education.

Introduction

At London Metropolitan University, human rights forms an essential basis of our secondary level initial teacher education Post Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) programmes. Ongoing and continuous reference is made to human rights throughout the programme in relation to specific subject teaching pedagogy and teaching about broader professional roles and expectations. As a result, it seemed natural to engage in a collaboration between these two subjects based upon human rights. We also liked the potential challenge of two very different curricular areas attempting to collaborate, believing there could be some significant risks inherent in this as well as providing a formative experience that our students could draw upon in the future. The initial planning stages started from a pragmatic and highly practical point; we wanted to involve the student teachers from the Citizenship and Modern Languages (ML) PGCE courses in a collaboration which allowed them to gain experience of collaborative planning and teaching, experience of teaching post-16 and experience of teaching across the curriculum.

Human rights underpins one of the so-called 'Key Concepts' of the statutory National Curriculum for Citizenship in England for 11-16 year olds (QCA, 2007). As such,

Citizenship lessons will often have a rights focus and school students explore issues surrounding rights in different local to global contexts. Citizenship student teachers are encouraged to be creative in the way they explore such issues in order to teach not only about rights, but for and through them as well. Previous research amongst student teachers on this course also revealed the impact of the affective/emotional element of teaching about rights including the importance of locating and exploring rights in specific cultural contexts (see Bhargava and Jerome, 2009).

Based upon Osler and Starkey's holistic vision of citizenship education, the course encourages student teachers to appreciate the link between structural/political and the cultural/personal elements of the discipline and to make use of these connections to promote effective knowledge and understanding (Osler and Starkey, 2005). It was hoped that the collaboration with Modern Languages student teachers would enable the Citizenship students to understand the importance of language in societies as well as accessing, exploring and exploiting the cultural contexts of certain countries chosen to exemplify human rights issues.

Since curriculum changes in September 2004, modern languages have been an option of study for school students in English schools from the age of 14. This means that it is possible for a student to study a modern language for only the first three years of secondary school (ages 11-14). This is possibly a uniquely English dilemma but as a teacher educator specialising in the teaching of modern languages, the decline in the 'take-up' of modern languages is of great concern.

Possibly as a response to the above, there has been a renewed interest in language teaching through the concept of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). This is 'any dual-focused educational context in which an additional language, thus not usually the first language of the learners involved, is used as a medium in the teaching and learning of non-language content' (Marsh, 2002). One of the aims for the collaboration was to reinforce for modern languages student teachers the range of topics through which linguistic concepts can be taught.

We also referred to Starkey (2002) who suggested that 'Although the potential range of subjects to be taught through a CLIL approach is limitless, human rights education might be a particularly appropriate field for further experimentation.'

The 2008 revised National Curriculum for England encourages greater cross-curricular collaboration between subject areas. Seven cross-curricular dimensions were introduced to both underpin and support such collaborations. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority suggest these dimensions are 'crucial aspects of learning that should permeate the curriculum and the life of a school'; providing young people with a chance to 'unify' areas of learning and to 'make sense of the world'. (QCA, undated,). The dimension we chose to concentrate on in this collaboration was that of 'The Global Dimension and Sustainable Development', focusing in particular on developing understanding of 'long term global challenges including climate change, conflict and development and how these issues impact on and change society' (QCA, undated).

Planning

At the start of the PGCE course both cohorts of student teachers benefitted from teaching sessions run by Amnesty International and UNICEF. These sessions provided an opportunity for the student teachers to develop their conceptual knowledge, understanding and pedagogy surrounding teaching about, for and through human rights. These were delivered before the student teachers commenced their school-based practice. The sessions were also intended to induct the student teachers into the 'Rights Respecting' philosophy of the programme and served as a 'lead-in' to the development of workshops to be taught to Year 12 (16-17 year old) students in an inner-London secondary school.

The student teachers were briefed about the workshops and were divided into three groups according to the language specialisms of the Modern Languages student teachers. Two days were timetabled for planning the workshops and preparing the necessary resources. We had considered giving the student teachers the freedom to choose their own focus for the workshops but after some thought we decided that this might create more problems and issues than benefits. It was also important that we chose foci that contained the implicit and explicit requirement to reflect the three selected languages (French, German and Spanish) as part of the linguistic heritage and cultures of the chosen countries/regions. After some discussion we chose to focus on human rights issues in Bolivia, Haiti and Namibia.

The student teachers were briefed about the structure of the morning at the secondary school as well as our reasons for valuing this work; we had wanted to draw on the cultures of both university and school and were aware that in both contexts cross-curricular planning and teaching was often an ideal rather than a reality.

The planning proved to be more difficult and more problematic than we had initially envisaged. Whilst we, as experienced practitioners, felt comfortable about the idea of working outside our immediate subject area and had experience of this kind of cross-curricular working, this was a difficult prospect for many of the student teachers as we will illustrate later. During these two days we spent much of the time ensuring that the student teachers were making progress with the planning. We encouraged them to consider how they could synthesise the teaching and learning approaches of Citizenship and Modern Languages in order to prepare and present cohesive and dynamic workshops. We emphasised regularly the importance of working collaboratively in the context of their professional development

The 'Light Up Rights' morning was held on 29 January 2010. Approximately 100 school students attended the six workshops offered by our student teachers. Overall, the feedback from the students and school teachers involved was very positive. It was clear that the school students had made good progress in their understanding not only of the issues but also their appreciation of the importance of human rights. Many school students indicated that they felt motivated to take further personal action about the issues explored. Our student teachers were asked to reflect upon the whole experience using an online survey in relation to a number of key questions posed. These responses highlighted a number of interesting insights into both this experience and, more broadly, issues concerning their identity as subject teachers that we will now explore.

Citizenship issues

Since its introduction to the English National Curriculum in 2002, Citizenship has often needed to fight its corner in schools, despite its statutory status for all 11-16 year olds. In a curriculum of strong subject classification, Citizenship has sometimes struggled to articulate what 'it is' and, indeed, what 'it isn't'. The nature and content of the 'light touch' 2002 Programme of Study did little to classify the subject in an already highly framed curriculum. This confusion has often been exacerbated where schools have integrated or combined provision with other curricular areas including Personal, Social and Health Education and Religious Education. Not surprisingly, many school students have found it a challenge to effectively articulate either aims or content of the subject; a difficulty often shared by teachers and school managers too.

As Hayward and Jerome (2010) have suggested, this weak subject classification also made life difficult for Citizenship PGCE student teachers. In comparison to student teachers in other subject areas who have experienced the pedagogy of their curricular areas and elements of the knowledge base in their own educational journey, Citizenship student teachers tend not to have such crucial advantages. Citizenship PGCE courses have an important role to play in developing such knowledge and pedagogy, but such an approach may be in stark contrast to the realities of the schools in which they undertake their teaching practice. Some Citizenship student teachers may adopt teaching approaches that are effective at managing classroom behaviour, but do little to develop a distinct subject pedagogy, or develop effective understanding and skills.

The introduction of the revised National Curriculum for Citizenship in 2008 has played an important role in clearly defining the concepts and skills that define the subject. The focus on developing conceptual understanding and skills, backed with attainment levels for 11-14 year olds, has played an important role in helping to frame the subject, as well as indicating progression in the essential concepts and skills.

A considerable period of time is spent in the Citizenship PGCE course in developing the student teachers' understandings of these key concepts and skills, as well as understanding progression within the subject. Subject sessions are taught using a range of pedagogical devices appropriate for teaching this subject, in order to model best practice. Furthermore, the unique contribution of citizenship education to a child's development is continually emphasised. Not surprisingly, students on the course become informed, passionate advocates of the subject in their own professional practice; this self-assigned role is, itself, a crucial part of developing the reputation and wider understanding of the subject.

However, our collaboration may suggest that stronger framing within the curriculum and within the Citizenship course might be, to some degree, detrimental if insufficient attention is given to exploring the potential of other subject areas in helping to develop understanding in areas that might be seen as key elements in citizenship education, such as human rights. It was clear, both in observations of the planning stages and in their evaluations, that Citizenship student teachers saw human rights as naturally 'their area':

> "This is a core of Cit Ed so not really any major challenges. I suppose the only problem was incorporating ML and getting it so that it didn't appear just tacked on" (SW)

> "Carrying out this project…[hasn't] enhanced my view on raising awareness in the classroom on rights as I have always felt strong about this as a Citizenship trainee. Developing young peoples knowledge on rights and responsibilities is a key element of Citizenship." (NK)

Similar statements were also included in evaluations, suggesting that the Citizenship teachers best understood issues of conceptual understanding and development in the field. Indeed, the need to incorporate a languages dimension was sometimes seen as a hindrance in developing such understanding

> "The challenge of this project was agreeing with our ML colleagues the level of depth required versus the language ability of the students. This did create a constraint and there were some areas that were 'dumbed down' to accommodate the language element" (MN)

Such an argument suggests issues may have been explored in greater depth without the need for a linguistic element. Disappointingly, this was a view shared by many, with few seeming to recognise the important role that a subject such as Modern Languages could play in effective human rights education, through creative incorporation of language within an overall teaching approach. Only a few were able to appreciate how such a collaboration may well have enhanced their own subject knowledge or human rights education pedagogy.

A major flaw in the collaboration, which we will address in subsequent years, was exploring with the student teachers the unique contribution of each subject in effective human rights education. The Citizenship student teachers found it difficult to recognise the role of languages in a rights-based learning experience such as this. A key concern was 'reconciliation' of two subject areas which they felt had a different conceptual and pedagogical core:

> "It felt as though we had to work to the lowest common denominator of pedagogical knowledge and skills [across both subjects], taking into consideration the lack of understanding of each other's subject areas…" (RB)

> "Teaching human rights with ML concepts has been difficult. This is because ML does not necessarily require debate or controversy" (BW)

The Citizenship student teachers didn't always recognise the key similarities, such as the discursive nature of both subjects, the fact that both areas should and can focus on the 'real world' and the practical applicability of both subjects in everyday life. A lack of knowledge about effective pedagogical approaches in language teaching was not surprising, but what was interesting was the fact that many Citizenship student teachers were unable to identify the inherent controversial nature of languages in general and their role in state-power dynamics.

Some of the concerns raised by the Citizenship student teachers related to progression and their sense that the school students had not sufficiently moved forward in their conceptual understanding of rights as they might have without the need to collaborate. Such concerns are both heartening and disappointing for Citizenship educators; heartening in the sense that stronger subject framing is providing clarity surrounding progression in Citizenship but disappointing since this collaboration should have more effectively encouraged the student teachers to move beyond the confines of the National Curriculum Programmes of Study.

There was some appreciation, nevertheless, of the potential of such a collaboration. One Citizenship student teacher felt that the collaboration had provided a 'multi-sensory' experience of learning about rights that had made the issues resonate more effectively with the school students. Another suggested an interesting approach that we hope to use as the basis of an activity with our students next year:

> "A more effective use of language to look at human rights could have been looking at the way things can be interpreted in different languages, whether the core meanings behind the UNDHR are understood in the same spirit depending on language and culture..." (JE)

Clearly, such an approach could generate an interesting discussion between the Citizenship and Languages student teachers which, in turn, would reveal the importance of cultural context and the power of interpretation in such contexts.

Modern Languages issues

Before considering the main issues arising from this collaboration, it is important to examine the profile of the student teachers who enrol on the Modern Languages PGCE at London Metropolitan University as it is very likely that it affects the way in which the student teachers approach the way they define their identity within their subject. Many (frequently at least half of the cohort) of the student teachers are native speakers of French, German and Spanish and come from a range of cultural and educational backgrounds. Many are not UK-educated but have received the majority of their education in other European countries, Latin America, Francophone Africa and so on. As a result of this, English is their second language and as student teachers training in England at an English university it is generally very clear to them why learning a second language is so important. As a consequence the need to reflect on the place of Modern Languages in the school curriculum was not something which had always seemed necessary; it was viewed as a given.

During the planning for the workshops, modern languages student teachers seemed to lack confidence in articulating the importance of Modern Languages teaching in both the discussions and collaboration with colleagues from another discipline (in this case Citizenship). To them, teaching about Human Rights was automatically seen as a Citizenship lesson/focus with languages simply 'tacked on'. As the following quote suggests, it seemed as if they were:

> 'Incorporating foreign languages into what was essentially a citizenship lesson with ML tacked on.' (GA)

However, as Michael Byram comments 'we should develop the potential for political education which exists in language teaching, preferably in cooperation with teachers of other subjects.' (Bryam, 2002).

Several of the Modern Languages student teachers presumed that they would be seen as a translation service for the Citizenship student teachers but this was possibly an illustration of their own viewpoint about how they had already classified subjects and how they viewed the position of their own subject. What they did not seem able to do was assert the importance of their own identity and subject area and the important contribution that the latter could make:

> 'The combination of Citizenship and ML worked really well, however, tutors should make it clear to both groups that even though the topic is on 'Human Rights,' ML is not present simply as a translation service. Some members of certain groups felt that the project was a citizenship focused lesson with French.' (DE)

This common feeling that human rights was 'automatically' a Citizenship area meant that the Modern Languages student teachers struggled to understand and assert the place of their subject within it. On a deeper level, they struggled to identify and articulate the importance and purpose of teaching and learning languages beyond the classroom. This contrasted strongly with the Citizenship student teachers who felt a strong identity with their subject and, as has already been discussed, are aware of the need for this strong sense of classification. It is interesting to consider whether the long history of Modern Languages in the school curriculum plus the language-learning experiences of the non-UK student teachers has meant that the these student teachers felt less need to justify the place of their subject. However, as noted earlier, the place of Modern Languages throughout the secondary school curriculum from ages 11-16 and for school students of all abilities is currently being questioned. It is therefore imperative that Modern Languages student teachers develop a similar ability to that of the Citizenship student teachers; they must be able to articulate more effectively the place of their subject in the curriculum. In future planning we will need to react to the suggestion of this student teacher:

> '... establish more clearly that it is a cross-curricula activity (weighted 50:50) as many people saw it as a citizenship lesson with a bit of ML thrown in, which it did feel like from the specification.' (CJ)

The evaluations from the Modern Languages student teachers revealed the extent of their difficulty in expressing their rightful place in the collaboration. They were not able to articulate the importance of language as a vital component of every individual's social and cultural identity, nor did they refer to the very real struggles of citizens to use their own language as part of their human rights. It will become increasingly important to address this component of language teaching through the examples of countries/regions where language is explicitly linked to identity such as Canada, Turkey, Belgium etc.

Conclusions

Our discussions and evaluations of the evidence have lead us to suggest that many of the Citizenship student teachers are overly protective of their area whilst not necessarily considering the substantive and unique contributions of languages in their own teaching. They need to understand more about how language knowledge helps us understand the values, dispositions and culture of a country and the political role of language. Moreover, they need to recognise creatively the way that other curriculum areas can develop citizenship and human rights learning that goes beyond what they can do themselves

Conversely, the Modern Languages student teachers need to develop their ability to articulate with greater clarity the power of language learning and to think more broadly about the nature and purpose of language teaching. There is a real need for Modern Languages student teachers to articulate the unique contribution of their subject, understand the socio-political role of language in history and the ways languages can be used to explore social issues. The nature of language teaching means that, as Starkey (2002) suggests, it is possible for teaching to include the following competencies for citizenship which are included in the Common European Framework:

- knowledge of the law and political systems
- knowledge of the present world
- knowledge of the principles and values of human rights and democratic citizenship.

We suggest that strong subject framing and classification, as exacerbated by the organisation of the English National Curriculum and our own teacher education programme, is continuing to be a barrier to developing teachers who will, in their practice, show commitment to social justice and human rights despite some of our best intentions and work in this area over the last two years. We need our student teachers to comfortably collaborate outside their subject areas, without seeing such endeavours as being threatening to their own subject identity or 'as a pollution endangering the sacred' (Bernstein 1971, cited in Scott 2008).

Next year we intend to continue to develop this work but will need to reflect carefully on these key issues. We are currently planning next year's collaboration and intend to start addressing the issue of collaborative working earlier in the programme in order to focus the student teachers on developing their appreciation of the contribution of other subjects. We hope that initial small-scale collaborative and cross-curricular working (for instance encouraging student teachers in their first teaching practice to teach something with a focus encompassing both subjects) will develop student teachers' confidence to articulate their own subject identity as well as promote greater cross-curricular integration before planning the Global Citizenship workshops.

The project challenged our student teachers to work together outside their comfort zone, but our evidence suggests that they are still hemmed in by their classified outlook. We need to problematise this outlook to develop teachers who really are effective change

agents. In their own professional development it is imperative that student teachers feel part of the identity of their subject areas, but can use this to collaborate confidently and generously with colleagues from other subjects in order to provide meaningful learning experiences for young people. Likewise, it is important to regularly engage our student teachers in conversations about their progress that make reference to the extent to which they are putting human rights and social justice at the centre of their teaching and learning.

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