

# Teacher Collaboration and a Transdisciplinary Approach to Learning: A Case Study

Andrew Powell  
OIS 4<sup>th</sup> Grade Teacher

## 1. Introduction

A feature of teaching and learning in the elementary section of Osaka International School is the emphasis on integrated or transdisciplinary inquiry based learning. Based on the philosophy of the International Baccalaureate's Primary Years Programme (PYP); a curriculum framework designed to educate children aged 3 to 12, teachers from various disciplines or subject areas contribute to a unit of work in order to enhance and extend the students' learning experiences. Planning and coordinating such a practice is a complex and challenging task, requiring considerable teacher collaboration. The following article provides a snapshot of the way in which this teaching and learning process has evolved through a unit of inquiry on Japanese culture and society.

## 2. Changing to a Concept-driven Approach

A unit on Japan has existed at OIS for a good many years. Originally thematic in nature, it was a product of the Japanese and homeroom teachers working alongside each other and contributing to building the children's knowledge of the country, its people, and history. With the adoption of the PYP, a change in teaching staff and attendance at McTighe's Understanding By Design workshop (2005), the Japanese and homeroom teachers have focused on a more concept-driven approach, which asks the children to address the central idea of why cultures change over time rather than simply Japanese history.

Changing to a concept-driven approach was quite an experience. It meant challenging the way things had previously been done, regardless of ownership; making whole-scale changes to curriculum, lesson plans and even teaching approaches. Many teachers would have been unable to cope with such a challenge so much credit must be given to the Japanese department who were prepared to embrace such a transformation with faith, flexibility and open minds.

The evolution of the unit of inquiry on Japan has been an ongoing process. In the early stages the Japanese and homeroom teachers met to redefine the concepts and content. While much of this was initiated by the homeroom teacher it was important to solicit ideas and perspectives from the Japanese department. Although the classroom teacher had more experience in concept-based curriculum design it was the Japanese teachers who had the content knowledge. By working together we were able to come up with a unit of inquiry which we felt embodied the principles of the PYP and would be an engaging and relevant pursuit given the context of our school.

## 3. Collaborative Planning

Prior to each unit of inquiry the teachers that will be integrating learning meet to plan the weeks ahead. This practice is usually coordinated by the homeroom teacher and an emphasis is placed on ensuring that the contributions that each teacher makes will be directed at making connections to the key concept of the unit (cultures change over time), as opposed to simply addressing the theme (Japan). The key contributors to this unit would be the Japanese and homeroom teachers with some support from the Physical Education (PE) specialist.

The nature of these planning meetings has evolved over time in a way that mirrors our knowledge of the unit, familiarity with the collaborative planning process and an awareness of each other's strengths, interests and backgrounds. Early on in the development of the unit the initial planning session was followed by many subsequent meetings as we were all unsure as to whether we were on the right track and such interactions served to clarify and affirm our endeavours. Of late, planning has been an easier task with one main planning session taking place between the homeroom and Japanese teachers. The homeroom teacher also touches base with the ESL and PE specialist to coordinate any activities or support that may compliment or enhance learning.

During planning meetings we review the previous year's unit and decide upon the approach we will take. Using a backward by design curriculum approach, as recommended by Wiggins and Mc Tighe (1998) we decide upon the final assessment task and plan lessons and activities in such a way that students are taught the skills and content needed to produce the final assessment. Discussion about approaches to teaching and learning, the sharing of methodology, and proposals for the ways in which we may enhance the children's experiences through field trips, guest speakers and the sharing of resources occur at this time. It is important to note that this is not always an easy task and at times involves disagreement; the challenging of ideas, preconceptions and personal and cultural values. The ability to act objectively and in a respectful and open-minded manner is essential as we make compromises, and at times take risks, by working at the edge of our comfort zones.

While we still touch base throughout the unit, such occasions are usually brief and of an informal nature. If something needs to be retaught or reviewed from a different angle we have the trust and confidence in each other to share our insights and suggest changes that need to be made. Flexibility is an important quality as we coordinate the shared activities and take into account unexpected problems. At the end of the unit we meet once again and reflect upon the unit. These meetings were especially important early on in the development of the unit as they served to give us confidence in what we were doing, while also shaping the future direction of the unit by exploring the changes that would have to be made.

#### **4. Putting the Plan into Action**

As the fourth grade homeroom teacher I have the most time and flexibility to devote to the unit. Therefore a lot of responsibility falls on my shoulders to cover content and skill based learning through the integration of disciplines such as language arts and social studies. I try to facilitate learning in such a way that makes use of a variety of recognized best practices, providing opportunities for students to build meaning and refine understanding through guided inquiry as well as other effective teaching strategies and techniques. The use of technology plays an important role in my presentations and is also used regularly by students for research based learning and the publishing of work.

With a large proportion of students coming from a non-English speaking background I work closely with the English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher to support students' language needs. Drawing on the work of Gibbons (2002), which asserts that effective ESL teaching strategies are effective teaching strategies for all students, I provide a great deal of scaffolding for student learning so as to challenge the students in their understanding of key concepts and content, while supporting their language needs. Students are provided with a teacher made course workbook, a glossary of subject specific terms (in English and Japanese) and bulletin board displays such as timelines and posters outlining key concepts. These resources help to highlight, reinforce and model content knowledge and are also utilized by the Japanese teachers. In the same way that they draw on work completed in my homeroom class, I also encourage the children to make use of Japanese language resources and work completed in Japanese class as it often compliments their endeavours.

Early on in our collaborative efforts the Japanese and homeroom teachers often taught the same content but in Japanese and English. While this assisted in language development and reinforcement, it did little to extend student learning and understanding. As we have become more confident in one another and more adept at planning we have moved to a situation in which we share responsibility for teaching content and addressing lines of inquiry, which as suggested by Erickson (2002), helps to develop integrated thinking skills and the ability to recognize patterns and connections in conceptual knowledge.

Many activities cross over the traditional boundaries or responsibilities of one teacher. This is particularly true of experiences that make use of guest speakers, field trips and our PE lessons. These activities are usually the ones which are the most rich and memorable for the students. As part of the unit on Japan the students have experienced a wide-range of supplementary activities which have contributed to their understanding of the central idea that cultures change over time. In PE students participated in judo and kendo lessons. A local history walk was conducted by a member of the local community, which documented change in his life-time. A samurai sword collector brought some of his collection to school for the students to see and hold. A field trip to the Osaka Museum of Housing and Living served to show what life was like in the Edo period and a trip to a local museum in Minoh helped document how life had changed since then. We were also fortunate to make connections with a local temple during our previous unit on celebrations and during that unit attended a fire-walking ceremony as part of the festival of Setsubun. This was then followed up by another visit to the temple in which the priest shared his experiences, knowledge and sense of self. The students were able to ask him an assortment of questions and afterwards he led us in a very special moment of meditation. Throughout these activities the presenters have ensured that the children's experiences of Japanese culture and society occur in relation to the key concept of culture changing over time.

The quantity and richness of the aforementioned learning experiences are not common in the average fourth grade classrooms and could not take place without the collaborative efforts of the teachers involved in the unit. Over a number of years we have built up strong links to the school and local communities so that we are able to make use of a variety of diverse resources. At times the teachers contributing to the unit go out of their way to ensure that the students have access to such rich experiences. Visiting possible field trip destinations on the weekend and sacrificing unscheduled class time to take part in these experiences have become common place.

Students and parents have expressed gratitude for the way in which we have structured learning and provided truly memorable learning experiences. In turn, the parents have also become more aware of potential sources that may augment learning and often suggest places to visit or people to interview.

### **5. Assessing Student Understanding**

Assessment is integral to the teaching and learning process. It identifies what students know, understand and can do. Throughout the unit formal and informal summative teacher assessment takes place to monitor student learning and understanding. In addition, the students are also consistently engaged in reflecting and self-assessing their own learning. Through such monitoring teachers and students can adjust teaching and learning to meet student needs and the exploration of lines of inquiry.

As mentioned earlier, deciding upon the nature of the final assessment task is one of the most important activities agreed upon during the initial planning meeting. Normally performance-based in nature, the final assessment provides the students with an authentic opportunity to synthesize their learning. Where possible, models and rubrics are used so that the students have a clear understanding of teacher expectations.

An important factor in ensuring student motivation and quality product has been the involvement of a wider audience. The final tasks have varied from year to year and have included a museum walk in which the students made a museum exhibition showing change in facets of Japanese culture and society over time, the students wrote and acted in a series of vignettes or plays which showed how an aspect of Japanese society had changed, and this year students were required to write a letter to the past, explaining to a child of a similar age how the future would be different from the Edo Period. The children were delighted when they received responses to their letters from a Middle School high level English class from our sister school, Senri International School.

### **6. The Power of Collaboration and a Transdisciplinary Approach to Learning**

The integration of teaching by homeroom and specialist subjects, when carefully planned is a powerful teaching approach which has provided students with experiences that would not have been possible if the homeroom teacher alone had directed learning. Planning and working collaboratively to integrate learning in a transdisciplinary manner has benefited the students in many ways. It has:

- enhanced student learning by providing students with rich learning experiences not traditionally offered in a regular classroom environment
- provided a more comprehensive approach to presenting key concepts, content and skills
- ensured quality teaching by teachers with experience in specific fields rather than overly relying on a generalist teacher's approach
- not only helped students to make connections between subject areas and prior learning experiences but also to see that learning is connected to real life and the world around them

The nature of the collaborative efforts and approaches taken during this unit have not only been rewarding for the students but also for the teachers. The benefits of a collaborative approach for teachers have included:

- membership of an effective team
- reduced teacher isolation

- an opportunity to improve teaching practice through the modeling of teaching methodology, critical analysis of teaching practices, and peer mentoring
- increased teacher commitment to collective responsibility for student learning
- an opportunity to share in success
- greater pride and job satisfaction
- access to shared resources and expertise
- exposure to alternate instructional practices
- greater awareness of the roles of other teachers
- awareness of different perspectives about student learning

## 7. A Personal Reflection

Taking part in a collaborative unit of work such as this has been a positive learning experience for me. Through my experiences and interactions I have developed a deeper awareness and understanding of myself, my teaching, and the skills necessary to work with others to facilitate a more thorough learning experience for the children.

Planning and teaching this unit on Japan has also helped me to build a better understanding of the host country, its people, culture and history. While I have so much more to learn I do believe that my experiences have been valuable in providing me with an opportunity to challenge preconceived stereotypes and alter my perspective on Japan, which have helped me to become more culturally aware. In turn, it has also led me to become closer to my colleagues and experience the richness of the Japanese spirit, something for which I am truly grateful.

As stated earlier, working in a collaborative manner is not always easy. Unless the stakeholders are completely committed to a shared cause effective collaboration won't occur. Furthermore, qualities such as respect, trust, open-mindedness, flexibility, cultural awareness and the confidence to take risks are essential to the success of such an approach. Far from being coincidental, these very same qualities are what we strive so hard to instill in our students and are embodied in the ethos of the International Baccalaureate programmes.

## References

Erickson, H.L. (2002). *Concept-based curriculum and instruction*. California: Corwin Press.

Gibbons, P. (2002). *Scaffolding language scaffolding learning: teaching second language learners in the mainstream classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

International Baccalaureate Organization (2007). *Making the PYP happen*. Geneva: IBO.

Mc Tighe, J (2005). *Understanding by design workshop*. Kobe, Japan.