

Fitting in with the Older Kids



Challenges and solutions to building interdisciplinarity between
existing Arts and Science modules

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Context



- ☞ HEFCE Catalyst-A project
- ☞ Experimental pedagogies (£50,000 – 18 months)
- ☞ Built on new evidence-based approach to defining/teaching interdisciplinarity
- ☞ For L&T purposes, main points are:
 - ☞ Need for expert support from staff in each subject simultaneously
 - ☞ Structured and facilitated collaboration (not 'as-they-like-it')
 - ☞ Aims/ILOs are developing ID skills and awareness, not new and expanded knowledge

We started with the best intentions...



- ❧ 3 entirely new Arts/Science modules from the ground-up
 - ❧ All new interdisciplinary ILOs and Aims
 - ❧ Mandatory for all students (avoid self-selection)
 - ❧ Full module staff from each subject committed to the model
 - ❧ Bank of PGR student mentors in each subject to train and supplement staff loads

What we got was less spectacular...



- ☞ 2 pairs of Arts/Science existing modules
 - ☞ Must fit ID pedagogies into existing assessment, aims, and ILOs
 - ☞ Staff from 3 of 4 subjects committed to 1 hour/wk for 4-5 weeks of term
 - ☞ Module optional for 1 subject
 - ☞ Probably some PGR, PGT or recent graduates to assist...maybe
- ☞ 1 currently nebulous extra-curricular module between several subjects
 - ☞ Will be voluntary, therefore self-selecting

So, what happened...and is it so bad after all?



1. Differing staff ideas of what ID meant
2. Timetabling and Institutional Systems
3. Student Satisfaction and Content
4. Assessment

Staff ideas of Interdisciplinarity



- ☞ First meetings spent, repeatedly, moving suggestions away from:
 - ☞ Elective models
 - ☞ Pooled/Shared knowledge models
 - ☞ Primacy of content (any)!!
 - ☞ Organic/transdisciplinary/expansionist models

- ☞ Right or wrong, our approach was specific, therefore:
 - ☞ Took time to find staff ready to listen
 - ☞ Took more time to re-explain principles to staff who kept defaulting to old models (then expressing concerns it wouldn't work)

- ☞ **Solution** was simple enough
 - ☞ Persistence
 - ☞ Patience
 - ☞ Consistency
 - ☞ Clarity

Timetabling and Uni Systems



- ❧ Funding came 3 days before new module deadline
 - ❧ New modules 2-3 year process, not 1.5

- ❧ New centralised timetable system
 - ❧ Deadline 2 months after start of project
 - ❧ Had to have pairs set and core structures agreed already
 - ❧ Had hoped for 4-6 months for this part
 - ❧ New system explicitly designed to prevent cross-faculty collaboration
 - ❧ It complicates assigning rooms and student overlaps

- ❧ **Solution** – Compromise on everything non-essential
 - ❧ Had to move very fast, trim down any complex ideas
 - ❧ Forced to settle on 4-5 week collaborations
 - ❧ Forced to take first pairs willing to do it (would have liked more disparate groups and hard sciences)
 - ❧ Held ground firm on teaching structure and principles of ID
 - ❧ Should have directly involved central timetabling from day 1

Student Satisfaction & Content



- ❧ Staff highly worried about upsetting NSS scores
 - ❧ Several horror stories “I remember what happened to [subject] when they tried something new in 3rd year”

- ❧ Worry over student rebellion
 - ❧ Students seen as openly defiant to anything not ‘core content’
 - ❧ One School pulled-out entirely over this fear

- ❧ **Solution** – talk a good game
 - ❧ Reassured staff that core of our model is *preserving* core subject learning
 - ❧ Focus is on student explicitly learning to use subject knowledge better
 - ❧ Student will be made aware of the value of this *in their subject*

Assessment



- ☞ We wanted to integrate ID skills into the assessment matrix
- ☞ Timetabling deadlines and staff fears killed this fast
 - ☞ Major revision to change assessment type or %
 - ☞ Worry over student rebellion for being assessed on ID
 - ☞ Staff wanted summative assessment to remain 100% subject content-based
- ☞ **Solution** – not much for it
 - ☞ We will 'evaluate' ID outcomes, via surveys, not assess summatively
 - ☞ Each subject already had 'reflective' component to assessment
 - ☞ This will marginally include views on ID sessions and articulating skills
 - ☞ Supplement also with PGR mentor ethnographies
 - ☞ Surveys and ethnographies were part of project from start

Bottom Line



- ☞ Plenty of staff open to new and innovative ID pedagogies
 - ☞ But time and patience needed to tease this out
- ☞ Engage with institutional systems right away
 - ☞ Preferably when still writing bid or speculating on local changes
- ☞ Know what you can compromise on and what you can't
 - ☞ Hold your ground or ID becomes untenable/watered-down
- ☞ Be persistent and consistent