DISCIPLINARY THINKING & SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

By Knightollie

This is the first of what I am hoping will become a series of short posts where I try to reflect on leadership in a challenging school and the process of getting out of Special Measures whilst trying to stay true to a set of values. The second blog in this series will then go on to look at school leadership and how it is often disconnected to school purpose.

This first post is written in response to the often polarised and unhelpful discourse of Twitter and the apparent emergence of single-interest stances that distort the debate around what and how we should teach in schools. The aim is to attempt to re-position the debate away from the unhelpful labels of 'Trad' and 'Prog' and makes the claim that academic subjects are the best and most tested vehicle we have for developing more powerful ways of thinking and understanding the world around us. It is this understanding that allows us to act with agency. In turn, it is this that is, I would argue, the fundamental purpose of state education.

What are disciplines?

I must admit that until recently I have never head of a 'Trad' or a 'Prog' and was blissfully unaware of these labels. I was however aware that I did not agree with the thinking around school design that foregrounded 'skills' and that saw the school curriculum as an after-thought or secondary to skill development.

Over the past decade or so, we have witnessed the moves away from academic subjects towards genericism and competence-based frameworks in schools. This has proceeded hand in hand with the mistaken view that teaching academic subjects is merely about providing information, rather than about developing forms of disciplinary thinking. It's fashionable now to ask, 'if we have Google why do we need subjects? Pupils just need the skills to find the information.' Put another way, in the words of Counsell:

"The view that disciplines can neither engage nor serve most pupils often betrays two misapprehensions: first, an assumption that a subject equates to information, as opposed to knowledge; second, a lack of awareness that a school subject such as history has long involved the active and engaging exploration of the structure and form of that knowledge, using concepts and attendant processes."

The skills argument, I believe, ignores the distinctive purposes of academic disciplines. Disciplines are not bodies of information to be consumed so much as distinctive ways of building knowledge, weighing evidence and finding truth. In schools, subject specialists should use their own disciplines to teach students how to think in particular, powerful ways. The particular disciplinary context of a subject is central to that particular way of thinking, of researching, of judging evidence and of building knowledge about the world. Academic subjects in schools should therefore provide disciplined forms of criticality; disciplined ways of reading, writing and speaking; and a disciplined understanding of how different types of knowledge are constructed. I want all teachers in my school to possess a deep understanding of the foundational rules and principles of their subjects and enable their pupils to serve an apprenticeship within that particular subject domain.

Two routes through the curriculum

To try to demonstrate the point let us look very briefly at what two different approaches might be to an enquiry incorporating the disciplines of History, Art and Geography. One framed within a competency or skills curriculum, the other with a focus on teaching for conceptual understanding – what I will label disciplinary thinking.

In the kind of cross-curricular approach that makes appeal to generic skills, and treats subject matter merely as information on which to practise generic skills, the typical pattern that we have observed is for teachers to come up with a generic theme (such as 'balance' or 'mountains') that claims to enshrine

a cross-curricular project but is only connected at a surface level rather than a conceptual one. Sometimes teachers simply take a content area, such as 'the Romans' or 'India', and then weave students' work purely around the content but without any sense of disciplinary goal.

Generic skills or competences are invariably invoked as the unifiers – e.g. finding or presenting information; research; team-work; reasoning; creativity – but, without any sense of purpose, the subject matter is reduced to 'information' rather than a disciplinary quest for a particular type of truth claim and a particular type of meaning. For example, a 'generic skills' approach to a cross-curricular project on the Romans might see pupils learning some surface detail and general information in the name of History, doing some map work and gathering/summarizing information on interrelationships and location in Geography and looking at Roman art or mosaics in Art, perhaps with students making their own mosaics. These elements might be linked by some general competencies, such as speaking and listening skills, research skills or reasoning skills, or creativity. Creativity might be expressed in all aspects of the work or in some final project. But how are pupils learning to think historically, geographically and aesthetically here? And how are these disciplines really being both taught well and linked together to become bigger than the sum of their parts?

Below is an alternative, and more powerful, version that leads to both deep and conceptual understandings.

Let us look at Year 7 and the Roman Empire. Firstly we need to decide on the disciplinary or conceptual focus – in this instance we could look at the concept of change; a focus on how far life changed and for what groups. We need to then connect the different subjects through the deeper understanding they can give to the concept students are developing an understanding of and also help students to see that the concept takes on different meanings as it crosses disciplinary thresholds. To do this we need to frame the learning as a 'Fertile Question': a problem to be solved. A way of achieving this could be to look at Leptis Magna in Libya as an expression of Roman thought and power – the way the Romans used art and the built environment as an expression of imperial greatness and higher culture as a way of controlling their empire.

The question might be something like '*Did the Roman Empire improve people's lives*?' In History we would look at the psychology of the art as an expression of power and an attempt at realizing hegemony, the changes that took place as the Romans entered (modern-day) Libya and the impact this had on different groups, interrogating the source material we find to say how people at the time might have experienced the change and reconstructing these experiences based on what the evidence does and does not tell us – a key difference from using 'research skills to access information'. In Art we would study how the Romans used art to express their wealth and power, their use of depth and perspective to create meaning and as a way of displaying their cultural superiority and attempting to transpose their cultural practices onto another people through their art; in Geography we would look at change – *how did different people experience the empire* (directly or indirectly) and how did they communicate this experience? *What has the nature, rate and extent of change been like? How might it be different in the future* (prediction)? This would then culminate in a performance of understanding that would require students to use their deepening knowledge of the concept of change to either criticize or create something new that answers the Fertile Question.

It is clear to see that whilst both these examples nominally look at the same 'content area' one remains inert and simply provides surface information with little deep learning whilst the other seeks to induct students into an 'apprenticeship in thinking' through looking at the same event through different disciplinary lenses.

Following on from some extremely useful feedback on the example above I wanted to add in a brief explanatory note. Whilst the example above is a cross-curricular or cross-conceptual example; this is because I was trying to find the most efficient vehicle for demonstrating what disciplinary thinking means across multiple domains or subjects. As Dylan Wiliam has pointed out, the outcome from the fertile question must be authentic to that particular domain. In the words of Dylan, "students engaging

in this work should increase valued discipline-specific knowledge in each of the disciplines included in the topic."

Disciplines misunderstood

So I firmly believe that all schools need to get to grips with the idea of disciplinary thinking. If senior managers in schools do not have a firm grasp of how academic subjects develop thinking, and empower students to succeed far better than a thinking- skills approach, then in the words of Christine Counsell 'how can they manage a curriculum in the first place?'

Part of the blame for the predominance of thinking-skills in UK education at the moment must be apportioned to those on the other side of the debate, the 'saviours' of traditional teaching. By expounding the virtues of 'traditional' subjects with their canons of knowledge (information) to be imparted and committed to memory, they have drawn an unhelpful dichotomy. In reality both camps are wrong, and a different approach is needed.

Students need to be active learners, who discuss, question and operate on the knowledge they are given in class; who connect it with other knowledge they have and use it to form new ideas. Those of us who advocate attention to the integrity of subjects as disciplines are not, contrary to the way we are often presented, arguing that students should be passive vessels, whose heads we fill up with facts and information that they can then recite back to us. A discipline- based approach is questioning, critical and active. It has to be, because to engage with a discipline is to engage with how knowledge is constructed in the first place.