

The Curriculum Story Project

5. Collaborative Planning and Professional Development

This pack provides examples of how settings and schools have harnessed collaborative planning in IDL as a way to further their professional learning.

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From individual professional learning to professional communities of practice.

Collaboration is a key feature of Interdisciplinary Learning (IDL) for educators, partners and learners alike. Many project-based learning approaches can be planned by individual teachers. But Interdisciplinary Learning makes that planning inherently a team sport.

Collaborative planning and co-designing the curriculum for an IDL project requires dedicated space and time to meet. Collaborative planning may happen in conjunction with other teachers and educators, across stages and subjects, other schools, outside partners, parents and learners.

From individual professional development to professional learning communities who plan together

Collaborative planning of IDL benefits from a clearly defined rationale and the process by using a curriculum design cycle and thinking skills framework. These two elements create a common language, shared goals and experiences which are inclusive and meaningful to educators, partners and learners. Otherwise, you risk a ramshackle collection of topics or subjects loosely around a theme, with no sense of 'completion' for learners.

IDL reframes professional learning as a coordinated team effort, contrasting with individualised professional development. Educational settings which invest in collaborative professional learning to support IDL might provide a fresh blueprint for professional learning communities in Scotland. The shift to a collaborative professional learning community may require a change in the culture of different organisations. Participants need a sense of shared values and purpose for collaboration.

Therefore, collaborative professional learning communities may share these key features:

- Reflective dialogue - perhaps through the lens of a design cycle.
- A shared focus on the learning and wellbeing of young people.
- Openness to collaboration, with a bias towards sharing ideas, strategies and making decisions for the benefit of the learners.
- Participation in professional learning opportunities such as professional reading or courses.
- Shared values about the purpose and aims of collaborative learning.

The role of leadership for successful collaborative learning and planning

Collaborative planning for IDL requires approval, investment and trust from supportive leadership. Supportive leaders establish the conditions for successful IDL projects by investing space and time for educators to collaborate. In addition, leaders support collaboration by encouraging openness to improve education through innovation and experimentation with IDL projects.

The IDL collaborative process requires autonomy and trust from leadership, empowering collaborative teams with the confidence to make decisions. Measuring the impact of IDL projects on learners is most valuable when informed by a design cycle research method. For example, the evaluations

from educators and learners are valuable data that can inform new iterations and features of the project.

So successful leadership of collaborative learning shares key characteristics:

- Approval and trust in the project.
- Establishing conditions for space and time for collaborative learning.
- An openness to improve learning through innovation and experimentation.
- Empowering collaborative teams with the autonomy and confidence to make decisions.
- The evaluation part and cyclical nature of curriculum design cycles to generate qualitative data to inform the next steps.

From collaborative planning to collaborative learning

Collaborative professional learning is also an inclusive framework to model when applied to partners and learners. Peer learning, coaching and mentoring are three powerful collaborative strategies that partners and learners can use.

A collaborative IDL project offers learners the opportunity to learn from each other's prior knowledge. Focusing on peer learning requires learners to share their strengths and skills to bring projects to life.

When learners don't know how to overcome their hurdles, it takes a coach to help them jump: prompting, encouraging and nudging them towards different solutions. This may need more creative timetabling and grouping of learners. That could mean larger groups, in larger, more flexible spaces, with more adults on hand. Successful coaching requires diversity and skills choices from a pool of coaches, such as teachers, teaching assistants, and partners beyond the educational setting, including parents and former students.

Mentoring is a strategy focused on inclusion and intervention, connecting adults with learners for specific reasons. It is hugely beneficial for learners who require an extra layer of support or challenge. Ideally, learners would meet 1:1 with a mentor or in small groups.

Therefore, collaborative learning practice may share some of these key features:

- Peer-learning - where learners support one another within a project.
- Peer-learning where older learners help younger learners.
- Coaching opportunities are derived from a broad mix of adults and former students sharing their skills and enthusiasm.
- Creative timetabling and grouping of learners.
- Mentoring structures provide focused intervention for learners requiring extra support or challenge.

Bucksburn Academy, Aberdeen: A whole school model for autonomy

A whole school's focus on the positive ethos from community-building underpins successful collaborative professional learning.

At Bucksburn Academy, a whole school community approach to collaboration has influenced curriculum design. Educators have found various ways to spot connections and plan for relevant and purposeful IDL units. In addition, the leadership team encourages staff to be autonomous and bold with the experimentation and innovation of IDL.

Autonomy is a critical element of collaborative professional learning. Educators need the trust and support from their leadership to empower them to make their own decisions and be bold with planning choices for curriculum design. Autonomy is a core part of the “FACE” model that Bucksburn Academy uses to improve learning and collaboration. The model involves:

Feedback – strategies for high-quality feedback

Autonomy – interdependence, not isolation; knowledge; attitudes; skills; and habits

Challenge – thinking skills frameworks related to powerful questions

Engagement – tools and techniques to increase levels of learner engagement in the classroom

The FACE model focuses on collaborative professional learning on specific aspects of learning and teaching. For example, educators use the FACE framework when visiting another classroom to observe practice and to help to choose a starting point for possible books at the school's professional learning book club.

Bringing subject specialists together

The team at Bucksburn Academy plan to bring subjects together to make initial connections and generate ideas for IDL collaboration. Educators are beginning to see how they could do more in less time by working across subjects. For example, English teachers often prepare learners for talks, and science also requires the same oracy skills. So, by departments working together, young people can learn the content in science and then focus on the talk presentations in English. This is also goes some way to students working on skills in one subject area but with low interest or relevance of the content.

Bucksburn Academy's leadership team tries to ensure that time for collaborative planning and professional dialogue for curriculum design is included in the timetable.

Raising ambition through fresh pathways

The school talks about a 'six-year curriculum.' Instead of young people leaving school just to repeat Level 5 at college, the school staff have designed different pathways which feed into Foundation Apprenticeships at college. These include new learner pathways in lab science and photography, enabling young people to go to local colleges and sharing course options with another local secondary school, Dyce Academy.

The partnership with Dyce Academy has been established for nearly 30 years. The senior phase curriculum is mostly shared to ensure greater

choice in two smaller schools. Some courses are co-delivered, others are taught entirely in one of the schools. This provides greater breadth and depth in course choice and allows for more meaningful progression for young people.

“The pathways work requires persistence. You’ve got to socialise ideas around timetable and choice changes with staff and learners. The first time I presented the plan, it got knocked back. Then, after a year of talking about it, we agreed upon the plan.”

Mike Paul, Bucksburn Academy.

Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) presents many opportunities to ensure that the relevance of learning to employability is made explicitly across a school. However, Bucksburn Academy realised that they had tried to do it the wrong way round, starting with the senior phase, when they could have begun that work during the Broad General Education (BGE) phase.

Bucksburn Academy emphasises the fundamental responsibility of leadership to support all educators with the speed of change and the impact of transitioning to new structures of learning in the school. The school has made many changes in a short period, and the leadership recognises that not all educators work at the same pace. Moving forward, they know they have to make sure that staff are comfortable with the rate of change and its impact on the community.

The story of Bucksburn Academy highlights the importance of community persistence when changing systems and routines. The changes were not initially supported in the school community. However, school leadership persisted with the changes because they believed in the benefits they would bring to learners.

“Having all these options - college courses during school and apprenticeships, going to Dyce Academy for some courses takes young people away from the school community. That impacts the school community as well as them.

“It’s a less vibrant 6th year as a result, perhaps. But it also represents a transition period. The socialisation they have with people they don’t know at first, getting out of their comfort zone, is invaluable.

“We need to be smarter about bringing that 6th year together, online and in-person”.

Mike Paul, Bucksburn Academy.

Key features of collaborative professional learning at Bucksburn Academy

- The FACE model emphasises autonomy and improving learning and teaching through collaborative professional learning.
- Opportunities for collaboration and planning are timetabled.
- Educators make connections across subjects in various ways: staff meetings, classroom visits, book club, and speed dating.
- The concept of a six-year curriculum has extended the vision and relevance of the choice of learner pathways that the school provides.
- Collaborative professional learning focuses on the impact on learners, and the community culture allows educators to experiment and learn from mistakes.
- Leadership is conscious of supporting different staff needs as they navigate change and transition.

Hazelhead Primary School, Aberdeen: Collective planning

Space, time, teacher autonomy and collective decision making are key areas for unlocking successful teacher collaboration.

With collaborative planning, Hazlehead Primary increased the quality of curriculum design for IDL and the engagement of educators. The experience of lockdown showed what is possible when there is increased space and time for collaboration. Shared dialogue, debate, and decision-making impacted learner pathways' depth, breadth, and relevance. As a result, staff meetings predominantly focus on the curriculum design and relevant contexts that most impact learning.

Hazlehead Primary employs the concept of 'thematic worlds and rich contexts' to engage and challenge its educators to plan the curriculum design of IDL. The senior leadership team discarded pre-planned IDL 'big questions' when educators struggled to find relevant contexts to explore them. For example, a thematic science unit with the IDL big question, 'Is plastic fantastic?' was too narrow in focus. Instead, collaboration inspired the teachers to explore broader big questions. As a result, 'How can we look after the planet?' was agreed and provided a broader platform to draw on contexts that are more meaningful to learners.

The focus initially in the school has been on teacher learning and building teacher confidence while also recognising the role that their learners will have in co-design and development of initial ideas as projects progress.

"The teachers have to come up with the IDL big question first. Then, they must consider if the question is simple enough that a five-year-old can answer it but allows enough depth for a primary seven learner to go deep.

"Next, they collectively identify the necessary knowledge, understanding and skills the learners will need to apply to answer the IDL big question independently.

"Finally, the teachers plan relevant, rich cross-curricular contexts which teach what the children need to apply to answer the IDL big question autonomously."

Lynne Stuart, Depute Head Teacher, Hazlehead Primary.

Collaboration that constantly challenges and improves plans

The staff at Hazelhead Primary have a collective say in decision-making around curriculum design which makes a huge difference to staff engagement. Educators engage in robust professional dialogue when planning IDL projects across the school. As a result, planning IDL from P1 to P7 provides various possible learning contexts and experiences.

Teachers feel empowered to be autonomous, ambitious and experimental with curriculum design. The staff know their learners best. Therefore, collaboration generates a rich and exciting range of hooks and entry points to introduce a new IDL project. For example, teachers researched and shared personal family stories of World War Two which created a unique provocation to launch a learning experience. It also provided a model for learners to think



about their family tree in a new way (pictured). The natural connection had a significant impact on the curiosity and meaningful engagement of the learners.

Plan for collaboration: time, technology and space

The school leadership recognises the importance of creating time and space for collaboration. Therefore, the leadership makes an effort not to interfere with the process and allows educators and learners to take ownership of curriculum design.

“Create time, space and opportunity, but get out of the way. They know the differences between cross-curricular and deeper IDL. They need time to discuss, share and troubleshoot.

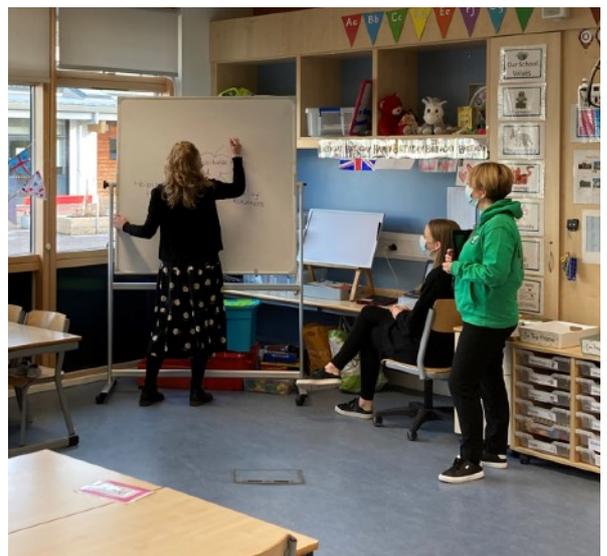
“We’re always there to remove hurdles or add ideas, but we have seen it doesn’t work if we try to drive it all – particularly as we’re not delivering it! All staff need to be involved in decision making, and they’re seeing that when learners have greater involvement, they get more into it, too.”

Lynne Stuart, Depute Head Teacher, Hazlehead Primary



Hazelhead Primary educators discovered that working virtually had its merits. The effective use and integration of a Google Workspace showed that collaboration can still happen, even when meeting in person isn’t possible. The school primarily used Google Meet for staff collaboration, and IDL planning was achieved across shared documents. Specific aspects of planning were delegated. For example, for World War Two projects, the P6 teacher planned the social studies learning, the P6/7 teacher planned around literacy and the P7 teacher planned numeracy-focussed ideas for all three of their classes.

Furthermore, as staff got to grips with the Google Workspace and other apps, staff members would innovate by investigating and trialling different options and reporting back and sharing. For example, how to screencast a film explaining lessons on the screen and leave voice comments for feedback.



Staff meetings for learning, not administration

Hazlehead Primary leadership team timetable and utilise staff meetings as forums for the planning of IDL projects. Staff meetings have more impact on learners when used as a space to plan, share ideas and co-design provocations. For example, an increased focus on curriculum design allowed educators to gather all their ideas in one place. Also, teachers were responsible for planning certain cross-curricular areas in detail, like literacy and social studies, before sharing their ideas with the larger group. Individual pre-planning allowed teachers to plan in more depth when they reconvened as a group.

Hazlehead Primary now sees curriculum design as a co-design process where staff are also learners. As a result, they were inspired to go through

the big questions themselves. This has led to increased community participation, encouraging parents and partners to contribute more. Moving forward, the school wants to be more responsive to its learners' questions and decisions and experiment with different ways of showcasing learning that go way beyond traditional assemblies or open afternoons.

Key features of collaborative professional learning at Hazelhead Primary:

- Planning and dialogue about curriculum design are timetabled during staff meetings.
- Rich contexts and 'big questions' for IDL engage educators with collaborative curriculum design.
- The school leadership team encourages staff autonomy by not interfering with the collaborative planning process.
- Allowing individual teachers to focus on specific curriculum areas allows for more depth when these ideas are shared collectively.
- The staff see themselves as learners too. As a result, IDL units are co-designed with teachers and learners.

Resources

A Case Study on the impact of Interdisciplinary Learning at Hazlehead School, Aberdeen - https://education.gov.scot/media/20flphza/idl-case-study_-hazlehead-school-primary.pdf

Hazelhead Primary's IDL Journey - <https://sites.google.com/ab-ed.org/hazleheads-idl-journey/home>

Example of learner research on IDL 'big questions' - Illegal Fishing Presentation
<https://www.hazlehead-ps.aberdeen.sch.uk/illegal-fishing-presentation/>

Discussion Prompts

You may wish to use these discussion prompts with your team or create an interdisciplinary learning session with colleagues from across your setting. Set aside three sessions to tackle each question in turn - use the time between sessions to research, experiment and probe further.

Session 1: How do you ring-fence time and space for collaborative professional learning in your school or setting?

For example, do you regularly manage to timetable opportunities for curriculum planning and dialogue during staff meetings?

Session 2: What new strategies could you consider that facilitate more collaboration amongst educators?

For example, how could you use ideas such as speed dating, book clubs, or the design of learning provocations for IDL to bring educators together?

Session 3: How will you support staff who may struggle with the speed of change or the new demands that an emphasis on collaboration might require?

For example, could you use the example of allowing educators to plan individually or across shared online documents before sharing and making choices as a group?

Next Steps

Tell us how it went:

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