A Guide to
Good Project Work

If cross-curricular projects are done well, they can open students' hearts and minds, but good projects are few and far between. **Jackie Beere, OBE** passes on some rules of engagement.

Are you thinking about your curriculum? We are being advised that Ofsted is shifting its obsession with data and outcomes to valuing a curriculum that has 'purpose and clear design' with an appropriate model of progression. In their recent study they found some schools' curricula lacked a sense of clear intent across all groups. So, what is your intent?

When you revisit this with staff in the coming weeks and months, I am sure 'giving the pupils memorable, empowering learning experiences that inspire high aspirations and a growth mindset' could be one of your intentions!

Learning can't always be like this. Sometimes it's hard work, repetitive and a struggle. However, by including cross-curricular projects in your curriculum offer, you can introduce flexibility and real-life learning with exciting challenges that make an impact on the way pupils think. It's also a chance to explicitly develop character, resilience, communications skills and emotional intelligence, as well as understanding how to apply subject knowledge and skills to real challenges.

This article presents some ideas for cross-curricular projects that can offer opportunities for more of those memorable learning experiences that can change hearts and minds.

What project do you remember doing from your school days? Do you remember one that fired your imagination, your enthusiasm and interest? We all (hopefully!) have one. For me, at 10 years old, it began with writing a letter to Air Canada at the start of a project about that company and that country. I still have the letter, the reply, the folder of work I spent hours painstakingly producing and the feeling of pride it gave me in doing it. This project gave me a lifelong passion for travel and exploration.

Imagine this scenario:

The buzz of enthusiastic activity hardly changes as I walk into the room ready to continue the project lesson—they've started without me! The classroom was full before the end of break with children retrieving their project work from trays or going online to show their friends what they discovered or created at the weekend. Strange spicy smells waft up from sample foods cooked by pupils at home. I find my purpose is simply to advise and guide but mostly admire the high-quality work produced by each group. Once again, they have exceeded my expectations.

Today is 'Preparing for Performance'. Each group has a ten-minute slot in which to sell their own International Restaurant to the class and our special adjudicator—a local minor celebrity chef. Some parents and the Head are joining us for the presentations too. It's high stakes and scary stuff for the pupils and me. Groups are busy working on their PowerPoints, prezzies, visual aids or prompt cards and my job is checking that all members of the group are fully engaged and involved.

I remind the class how to vary the content of their performance and present ideas with enthusiasm and confidence. This is the outcome of 5 weeks of project work and everyone has worked so hard to produce a plan for their own restaurant. They have visited local restaurants,

analysed staffing models and costings, cooked sample menus and trialled them in our school kitchen. Many of them watched television food programmes for research purposes.
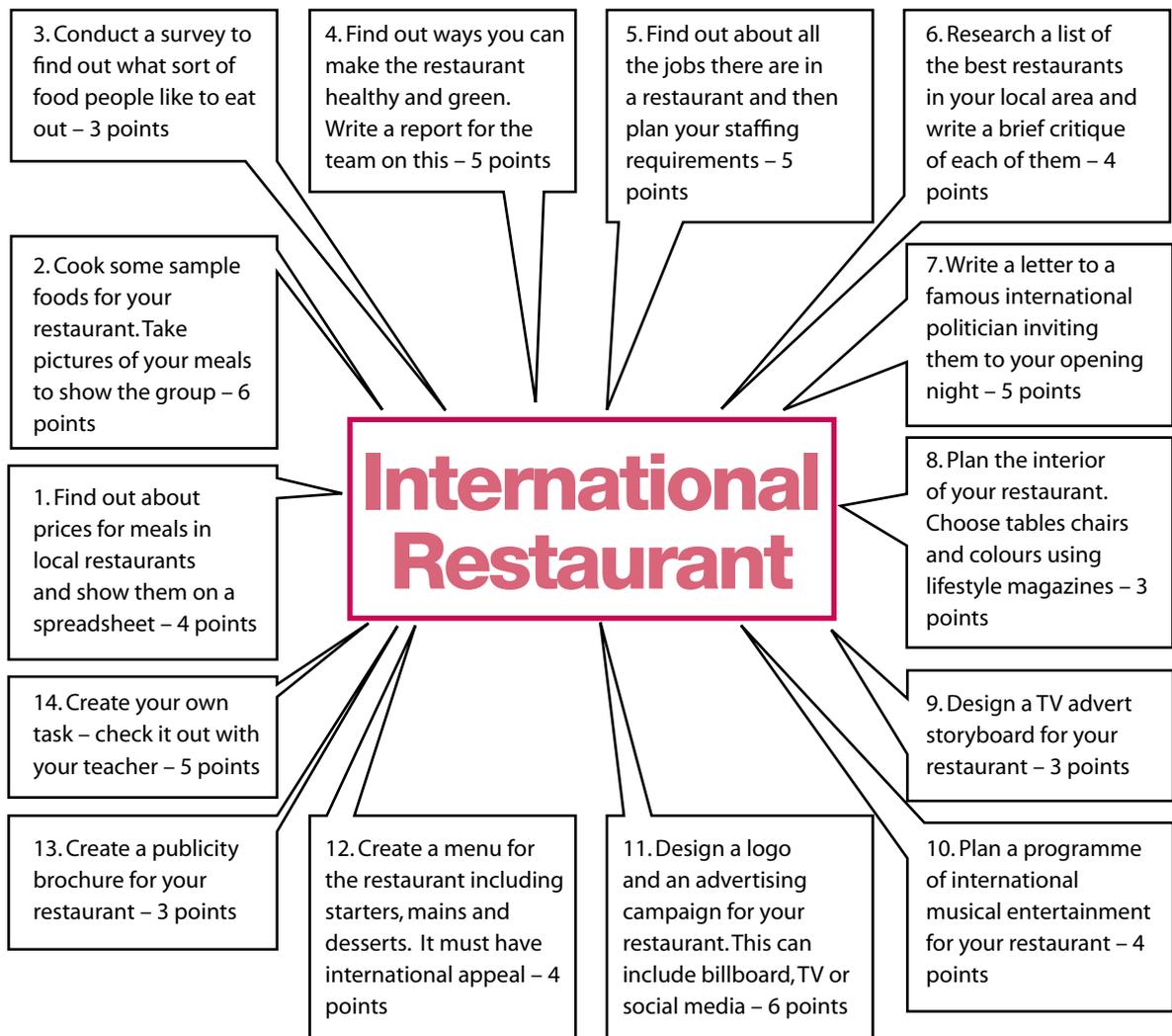
I'm glad we formalised the performance by moving to the Community Centre, despite the difficult logistics. This helped make it an unforgettable experience. I ache with pride as one group sings their hilarious marketing ditty, cringe when I see mistakes on a spreadsheet analysing costings for staffing and marvel at their use of technology—videos and pictures, how they saw the potential of social media marketing techniques etc. The children had created their own restaurant ideas and out-performed all our expectations.

The chef evaluated each restaurant and asked the audience to decide where they would choose to eat from the various venue and menu ideas on offer. The most popular restaurant won a special project award. Rapturous applause for all from peers and visitors made this a very special learning experience.

Group goals always include finding ways to maximise effort and input from all members of the mixed-ability groups of 3 or 4. They share their learning journals with their learning partners for peer critique. In their reflective post-project journals children are encouraged to recognise what each member of the group contributed and how this enhanced group performance. This is part of the post-project evaluation that every pupil must deliver that helps me monitor and record the learning from the project.

It started with this:

Objective: Create your own international restaurant and present your plan to an audience for feedback. Start by choosing 6 tasks and plan them by setting your success criteria for each task.

3. Conduct a survey to find out what sort of food people like to eat out – 3 points

4. Find out ways you can make the restaurant healthy and green. Write a report for the team on this – 5 points

5. Find out about all the jobs there are in a restaurant and then plan your staffing requirements – 5 points

6. Research a list of the best restaurants in your local area and write a brief critique of each of them – 4 points

2. Cook some sample foods for your restaurant. Take pictures of your meals to show the group – 6 points

7. Write a letter to a famous international politician inviting them to your opening night – 5 points

International Restaurant

1. Find out about prices for meals in local restaurants and show them on a spreadsheet – 4 points

8. Plan the interior of your restaurant. Choose tables chairs and colours using lifestyle magazines – 3 points

14. Create your own task – check it out with your teacher – 5 points

9. Design a TV advert storyboard for your restaurant – 3 points

13. Create a publicity brochure for your restaurant – 3 points

12. Create a menu for the restaurant including starters, mains and desserts. It must have international appeal – 4 points

11. Design a logo and an advertising campaign for your restaurant. This can include billboard, TV or social media – 6 points

10. Plan a programme of international musical entertainment for your restaurant – 4 points

Primary File

The example above shows how projects can work to create exciting learning experiences, but we also need to ensure rigour and progress.

Assessment opportunities

The Personal, Learning and Thinking Skills (PLTS), an assessment tool that is useful for preparing a cross-curricular project, helps focus the values you want to deliver across any project work.

How did I progress on each of my Personal, Learning and Thinking Skills?

INTERNATIONAL RESTAURANT			
PLTS	**My comment**	**Peer comment**	**Teacher comment**
Teamworking			
Self-Management			
Independent Enquiry			
Effective participation			
Creative Thinking			
Reflective learning			

If projects finish with this sort of activity, it can focus on the skills and habits we want to nurture and help our pupils have a growth mindset which learns from success *and* failure. The essential *Reflective Learning* section should also show how other subjects or prior learning were used in the project. For example, maths and ICT in the calculation of food costs, English and Art in the design of menus and marketing copy, science in the health and safety aspect of food management etc.

Connecting what we teach them in maths and science and literacy with a project setting helps children realise that real learning happens when you apply prior skills and knowledge to a new situation. Authentic, real-world projects reinforce the need to do this in the changing workplace.

Why develop ambitious cross-curricular projects?

The goalposts are moving again. New voices in Ofsted suggest we can transform our curriculum to make it prepare children better for living in a fast-moving, uncertain world driven by social media, where the gig economy represents the career choice for many. Employers complain that school or university leavers need more resilience, emotional intelligence, better communication skills, self-regulation and learning strategies, which, as EEF research shows, particularly benefit disadvantaged learners who struggle to fulfil their potential. How can the new freedoms within the curriculum deliver these without adding huge work burdens to our exhausted teachers?

Carol Dweck's research demonstrated how developing a growth mindset can help children and adults become the lifelong learners they need to be to thrive in school, relationships and the workplace. Many schools have identified slogans and strategies to help children get in the habit of enjoying the struggle of learning rather than obsess about test scores. But what sort of curriculum will support, challenge and, indeed, embed thinking that empowers all our pupils for a future that is changing so quickly?

Knowledge is essential, despite having Google. Alongside knowledge, critical thinking is needed to help us challenge fake news and take a philosophical approach to simplistic statements so we can evaluate, analyse and argue a case, developing the essential habit of empathising, if not agreeing, with other viewpoints. Crucially, we also need to apply metacognition whenever our emotions are manipulated by the herding instinct within social media. Teamwork in projects, negotiating with each other and examining sources of evidence are all useful activities to develop these vital skills.

Children can develop their own low-stakes tests, such as quizzes, bingo and word searches to check on how they are acquiring important knowledge about their set topic. Their learning is self-motivated and peer pressure in their teams works to raise standards.

Working in teams to create an authentic real-life outcome enhances achievement, as Ron Berger explains in *An Ethic of Excellence.* When we give children real-world

projects that involve critically examining models of excellence and which result in a public presentation, we raise the bar. By using this approach, with the PLTS as an assessment tool, and encouraging peer critique and peer coaching throughout a project, we will help develop the habit of metacognition. This will foster a learning mindset that will enhance progress in all aspects of the curriculum. Project work is our opportunity to connect other learning and grow skills to make emotionally intelligent learners.

As a teacher, curriculum leader and Head teacher, I have spent three decades developing cross-curricular projects for Key Stage 2 and 3, and many of these ideas were developed in my books T*he Primary Curriculum Toolkit* and *The Competency Curriculum Toolkit*. Projects can give pupils explicit opportunities to connect their learning with their personal development, take an active part in designing their own learning challenges and evaluating outcomes and develop a growth mindset culture that values effort and learning. Projects designed with these aims in mind align with the latest 2019 Ofsted curriculum guidance, which encourages a broad and balanced curriculum that empowers all learners. The measure of success will be how pupils can apply what they have learned, both knowledge and skills, to the next stage of their progress.

How do we plan a series of cross-curricular projects? There are great examples to download which can be mixed and matched with bespoke projects designed by staff to create commitment and enthusiasm. Keep guidance simple and flexible so that teachers can adapt ideas to suit any age group. How about using this framework to guide staff to build some cross-curricular projects?

Stimulus – *involves pupil choice*	PLTS focus	Philosophical question	Knowledge input	Subject links	Authentic outcome
A COMPANY Children discuss then choose a company to form then plan their own mini enterprise/ company as a group.	■ Enterprise skills ■ Creative thinking ■ Independent Enquiry ■ Effective participation	Is profit always the most important aim for a business?	■ Prior knowledge of any businesses ■ Profit and loss ■ Marketing ■ Local products	■ Maths ■ Science ■ Literacy ■ Oracy ■ Art	Present your business plan to local entrepreneurs. **Extension**: Make and sell products
A TEXT 'Macbeth' for example	■ Self-management ■ Reflective learning ■ Teamworking	Is ambition always a good thing?	■ Shakespeare's life and times ■ Scottish history ■ Witches and superstition	■ English. ■ History ■ Geography. ■ Oracy ■ Personal	A performance of part of the play to school, parents and local actors.
A COUNTRY Children choose a country to study and eventually create their own.	■ Teamworking ■ Independent enquiry ■ Creative thinking	What makes people feel they belong to a country?	■ The physical and human geography of Britain ■ Overview of the globe	■ Geography ■ Science ■ Sociology	Create your own country and sell it at a fayre.
A PROBLEM Solve an important problem – e.g. global warming, traffic jams, animal extinction, over-population.	■ Creative Thinking ■ Reflective learning ■ Independent enquiry	How do human beings solve problems?	■ Model a problem-solving strategy for a specific issue within: a) the school b) the local area	■ Geography ■ Science ■ Maths	Film a documentary around your problem to screen to invited relevant local dignitaries.

Primary File
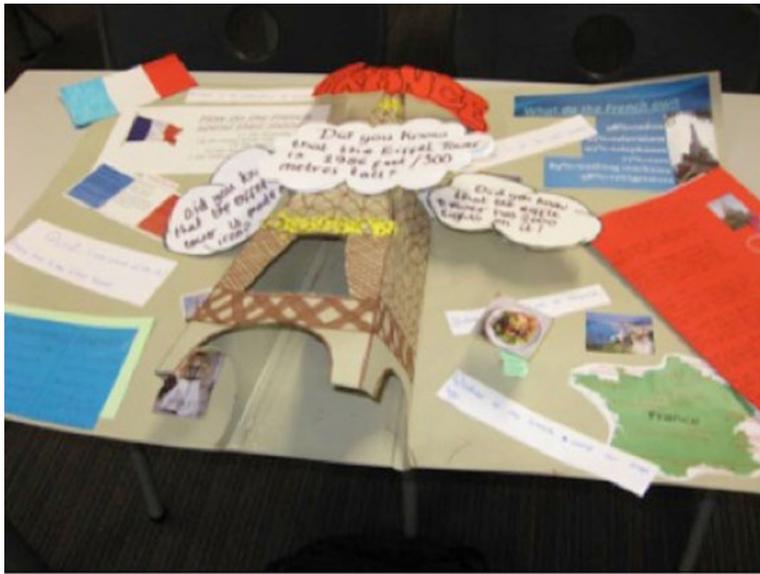
Taking risks for learning – 'Playing with Fire'

One of the most inspirational experiences I have had as a trainer and consultant was visiting West Rise Junior School in the South Downs. Head teacher Mike Fairclough bases his curriculum on 'doing and making' in an environment where water buffalo run wild across 120 acres of marshland in the school grounds. Projects involve tending to these beasts and a range of impressively dangerous activities from rifle shooting to fire making. Building Bronze-Age roundhouses and beekeeping are further examples of practical projects that reconnect children to the natural world through animals and plants. The aim is an education that builds character and capability. All this requires high expectation and trust. West Rise is an outstanding Ofsted state school and offers us the example of how ambitious we can really be when considering cross-curricular projects that are truly memorable experiences.

Guidelines for ambitious cross-curricular projects:

1. Use knowledge input from the internet, teacher or local expertise.
2. Study examples of excellence within the topic.
3. Develop ambitious, real, local projects that push boundaries and encourage risk-taking.
4. Have a choice of activities to empower learners and encourage accountability and flexibility.
5. Allow the children to set their own rigorous success criteria for chosen tasks to enable self-assessment.
6. Include drafting and redrafting within the project activities to reinforce iterative learning. Include drafts in project submissions.
7. Use the PLTS to reflect on personal learning progress.
8. Have peer critique and low stakes testing embedded within the project.
9. Have a concluding public performance that elicits feedback.
10. Keep a reflective learning journal diary to encourage metacognition and build links to learning strategies. Include the answer to the philosophical question within this reflection.

Further Reading

Mindset – The Psychology of Success. Carol Dweck
The Primary Learner's Toolkit. Jackie Beere
The Competency Curriculum Toolkit Jackie Beere and Helen Boyle.
Playing with Fire Mike Fairclough.
An Ethic of Excellence Ron Berger.
Metacognition and Self-Regulated Learning Education Endowment Foundation.
For more downloadable examples of choice projects see www.jackiebeere.com

Build brainpower

A final point for serious consideration is the inclusion of a project for all age groups that focuses on the brain and how it learns. There are many examples in my books of how we can develop social and emotional intelligence and a growth mindset culture through project work. There are also lesson plans on how to understand and grow your brain and emotional intelligence. I would suggest a compulsory project for all age groups should be *'My Amazing Brain and how it works.'* Pupils could learn about the PET (primitive, emotional and thinking) parts of the brain, the huge potential of their brain to change and how to handle getting stuck, frustrated with team members or how to deal with moments of panic before a performance. They can then take the knowledge and skills they acquire in this project into the next and greater challenges.

The most fun any teacher team can have is creating projects that excite and thrill their classes. Now is the time to use training days to give your staff the opportunity to have some fun doing this. For school leaders, this is a great opportunity to evolve the curriculum. We don't have to change everything all at once just because Ofsted says so. But maybe we can create more of those unforgettable learning experiences that last a lifetime?

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