



Curriculum in the Classroom – from Cath Wan PYP Coordinator

What's the Importance of the Transdisciplinary Theme?

This week, I have been working with teachers to reflect on their first units of inquiry. One of the reflections that all teachers are asked to make, within the PYP programme, is: “what connections were made to the transdisciplinary theme?”

As you know, there are 6 transdisciplinary themes in the PYP Curriculum:

- Who We Are
- Where We Are in Place and Time
- How We Express Ourselves
- How the World Works
- How We Organise Ourselves
- Sharing the Planet

Each theme comes with a descriptor. For example, the descriptor for Who We Are reads: “An inquiry into the nature of the self; beliefs and values; personal, physical, mental, social and spiritual health; human relationships including family, friends, communities and cultures; rights and responsibilities; what it means to be human”. Throughout their time in the PYP programme, students will revisit this theme every year, sometimes exploring a new part of the descriptor, sometimes revisiting and digging deeper.

But where did these themes come from and how relevant are they?

The answer lies within the question of “what knowledge should students acquire?” In country specific curriculums, the government may decide what is relevant for students to know. When I taught in the UK, students were expected to be able to know about the wives of Henry VIII and have a knowledge of different national landmarks. Whilst it is lovely to have these titbits of knowledge, how relevant are they in an international context? Indeed, in an ever changing society, who gets to decide what essential knowledge students should leave school with?

This is where the transdisciplinary themes come in. In the 1990s, Ernest. Boyer (former President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and US Commissioner for Education) wrote about “core commonalities”. The eight core commonalities are things that all humans share, regardless of race, religion or cultural

background. They transcend traditional subject areas and act as a binding structure to the different paths of investigation that the students take. The core commonalities are:

- The life cycle
- The use of symbols
- Membership of groups
- A sense of time and space
- Response to the aesthetic
- Connections to nature
- Producing and consuming
- Living with purpose

If you have some spare time on your hands, look at the descriptors for our 6 transdisciplinary themes. You'll find all Boyer's core commonalities embedded in them.



At JIS, your child might decide, whilst developing of sense of time and place, to find out who King Henry VIII and his wives were or to discover the landmarks of the UK. However, these titbits of knowledge will be connected to a much larger, more relevant theme that all humans share. The transdisciplinary themes therefore, provide the 'big ideas' of what knowledge and understandings students should have. They provide part of the structure to our curriculum, but still allow for students inquire into things that are relevant and engaging to them.

