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Let's take a look at the range of things that pupils in our classroom use or consume: worksheets, power points, words, texts, images, paper, glue sticks. These are made available to them as part of their learning. And we need to consider the extent to which these elements are adding value to their learning, or whether they are part of a process that provides evidence, mostly flimsy that something has happened in the lesson. The temptation is to think, well I made all these resources, the pupils did this with them, therefore learning must have happened. But did it, really? If we are not careful, we are inclined to believe that because they were 'taught' through these consumables, therefore something must have been learnt.

We need to shift the focus onto how pupils become creators with these materials. Each of them needs to be considered from two fronts: how, exactly will this worksheet, power point and so on, add value to learning. And secondly, what are pupils going to do as a result of using them? If we are serious about deepening learning, then we need to pay attention to the creation aspect. We need to remind ourselves that learning is a change in the long term memory, that it is what we pay attention to is what gets remembered. There can be so much busyness around the use of these items in classrooms, that if we are not careful, more time is spent on the completion of the sheets, and the sticking in of the sheets into exercise books, than on the point of those sheets. Any proxy placed in books, to show that something has happened.

Instead our focus needs to be absolutely on what pupils are going to do with these resources. What are they going to create as a result of using them? What do we mean by creation? Creation in the classroom means knowing more stuff, having more insights, and over time (possibly in the lesson, possibly at some point in the future) being able to do something on their own terms as a result of the materials offered. The argument here is that it is not the consumption of the materials but what happens intellectually as a result of being offered those materials, that counts. Unless we are prepared to think this through and make it explicit in lessons, then learning is likely to be shallow.

What are some of the things that pupils might do that shift the intellectual space from consumers to creators? Here are some suggestions: The first is to shift from consumption to creation is through talk: pupils should be able to articulate why a particular resource is being used in the lesson. At the heart of this, is clear explanation from the teacher, and the expectation that pupils can articulate the same. Then a pupil might ask what is their response to this information? Do they understand it? If not, what are they going to do about it? The teacher might support this by asking pupils where they might have met this idea, or similar concept before? And then there could be further questions about pupils are finding hard about this? What else would they like to know? What are they going to do with this new knowledge? Has this information inspired poetry, literature, art or music for example? This might seem stretching it too far, but if we want to deepen understanding, pupils need to have multiple lenses and frames through which to consider new knowledge. What do academics say about this knowledge? How can we turn this knowledge into a format where we can remember it, perhaps through dual coding, for example?

There is a shift in cognitive demand when we back up the material with questions such as these. They turn the information from inert to alive, and take the pupils from consumers to creators. They are having to do something intellectually with what has been provided for them in that lesson. It will become apparent that this process will take longer than just the consumption route. And that is the point: doing fewer things, in greater depth and resisting the urge to get sucked into the curse of content coverage. Content coverage at its worst means throwing lots of stuff (metaphorically, not literally) at pupils in the assumption that this is the work and the expectation they will learn something from it. Jackson Pollocking the lessons with materials does not constitute learning. Keep throwing things, again not literally, making the assumption that pupils will learn as a result, is simply wrong.

We have to be hard-nosed about this. However, when we are clear about our priorities, namely deepening learning, it becomes easier to resist temptation to offer them more, when in fact less is needed. The lens through which we consider this needs to ensure that the curriculum thinking and planning consistently asks is what pupils are going to create, in terms of meaning, understanding and showing their knowledge as a result of this?

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Developing expertise

If we are serious about the curriculum, we need to think about how pupils develop expertise. There is a paradox to this, and it links to mastery - if we are expert at something or have mastered something, the conundrum is that we realise how much there still is to know and understand. At its heart, expertise is knowing something really well; the nuts and bolts and are able to show this in different contexts.

curriculum impact

Thinking about curriculum impact

When considering impact, the question that needs to be asked is whether our pupils have learnt what they have been taught and how do we know? It is important to remember that the impact judgement feeds into a single quality of education judgement, drawing together intent and implementation along with impact.

curriculum impact

Have they grasped it?

There is a joke about two men in a bar. One says to his friend 'I've taught my dog to speak French.' 'Really?' says his mate, 'Let's hear him then.' 'I said I taught him, I didn't say he'd learnt it' comes the response.

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