Blended Learning and Collaborative Interaction Between Schools

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BLENDED LEARNING AND COLLABORATIVE INTERACTION BETWEEN SCHOOLS

Evidence from the Shared Education programme in Northern Ireland

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We wish to acknowledge the work of the many teachers who have shared their insights with us during the courses described below; their schools are listed at the end of the report.

Introduction

The Repurposing Education through Blended Learning (REBEL) Erasmus Plus project has been exploring different ways that blended learning can cause teachers to rethink core issues about teaching, learning and assessment. But in the case study described below, blended learning has been used to promote a new way of thinking about the purpose of schooling.

Blended learning, the purposeful use of both face-to-face contact and online interaction, has been a strong feature of work that seeks to link schools together, often with the purpose of bringing children together who might not otherwise socialise and learn together.

In Northern Ireland, where around 93% of children attend schools that are either mainly Catholic in ethos or more broadly Protestant, a programme called Shared Education has been in place since 2014 with the express purpose of cultivating links between children at school. It sits within a policy landscape of Sharing Works: A Policy for Shared Education in 2015 and the Shared Education Act in 2016 which created the policy context for the subsequent funding opportunities for school partnerships. These were the Delivering Social Change Shared Education Signature Project (funded by OFMDFM and Atlantic Philanthropies delivered by EA 2015 – 2019) and the Peace IV CASE project (Funded by SEUPB, DE and DES delivered by EA and Léargas 2017 – 2023) By 2022, some 85,767 pupils in 807 schools and 322 partnerships are taking part, around 76% of the total number of schools. Although most of the links are between schools within Northern Ireland, the more recent work in Shared education has included schools across the border with Republic of Ireland. This has led to partnerships between pairs of schools where both are in Ireland and others where one school is in Northern Ireland and the other in Ireland. Most schools initially started to plan their social and curricular work around face-to-face contact, either in each other's schools or on 'neutral' territory. But since 2017, teachers have been encouraged to enroll on a professional development course to learn how to extend their face-to-face contact with online activities. The first of these courses called Collaborative Learning Online for Shared Education and Reconciliation (CLOSER) was taught to some 150 teachers between 2017 -2021 by staff at Ulster University and colleagues in Classroom 2000 (C2K), who facilitate and deliver the managed ICT network for the education sector in NI; a more advanced course, designed for those who had already taken CLOSER, called Deepening Online Learning for Collaborative Education (DOLCE) has been taught for the first time in 2022. In this short summary of the work carried out by teachers we highlight seven issues that relate to blended learning. The slides are taken from presentations that teachers did on the final day of the course when they had completed their projects in school.

1.Rationale

Blended learning can be used in many different ways to achieve a variety of goals, ranging from offering students greater access to courses that are offered in partner schools to increasing pupil participation in class by extending classroom discussion online (16-18 work available at http://rebelproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/NI-webinar-report.pdf). In the case of the Shared Education programme, however, the rationale for using blended learning is to enable pupils from different schools to be able to work together on curricular topics and in this process, to get to know children from different backgrounds to their own. The evidence in this paper relates to the situation in Northern Ireland but there are many other examples, such as those in Israel or in global links between schools in the so-called developed world with developing countries (Hunter and Austin 2022). Teachers in Northern Ireland who have adopted this approach to blended learning see three main advantages.

- The online element of their work increases the level of interaction with their partner school beyond that which would be possible from the face-to-face visits that take place. And frequency of contact increases the degree of trust between participants.
- Secondly, as the pandemic showed all too clearly, moving learning online ensured that relationships could continue and that the partnership was able to become more sustainable, avoiding transport costs and damage to their environment from additional use of transport.
- Thirdly, the focused use of ICT for interaction with their partner school helped schools consolidate their use of digital learning by involving pupils in work for a distant audience.

This was the point made by teachers working on a history project in Derry/Londonderry (in Northern Ireland, the same city is referred to in different ways by the nationalist/republican population who prefer 'Derry' and the Protestant/Unionist population who often use 'Londonderry' to stress their links with England and the role of London merchants in the history of the city).

Furthermore, the presence of this audience motivated learners, spurring them to write better and to improve their skills in oracy through listening to different accents in live video-conferencing sessions and expressing their own ideas.

"For the past two weeks my pupils have been working on their PowerPoints that arose out of a visit to the Walls of Derry. Normally when this is done within the classroom environment it is only shared with their peers. ***Due to our participation within this project it has enabled us to share our work with another school online thus contributing to us covering one of the 5 E's. It has made our learning more meaningful in that the audience the pupils were writing for were not themselves."*** (Teacher)

2. Teacher Professional Learning (TPL)

A core part of the successful introduction of this work has been the design of the TPL. It was based on partnered teachers coming together, either face-to-face or online for an initial 2-day course which was built around three central elements. The first was a demonstration of the way that other teachers had used different topics in the curriculum as the focus for joint collaborative work; the second was practical hands-on experience of the ICT tools that teachers could use in their project. The third was the expectation that teachers would draw up plans for a 4–6 week classroom-based project which they would implement straight after the first part of the course. Teachers then carried out their projects and came back together for a final day when they presented what they had done and described what challenges they had faced to others on the course. In that sense, the course had elements of a community of practice where shared education was not just about pupils working together but teachers reflecting on their own professional practice.

3. Underlying Theories

Two theoretical perspectives have been used to shape the work. The first is the contact hypothesis, a construct from social psychology that helps to pinpoint the conditions in which contact between different groups can be successful. It highlights the importance of the contact being cooperative rather than competitive, based on group-to-group interaction, long term rather than short term, between participants of equal status and with institutional support (rather than isolated individuals linked together)

In practice this has led to teachers generally working in partnerships of two schools, with children of around the same age and ability and working in mixed teams, with each team having members from both schools. In the slide below, a partnership between pupils in their first year at secondary school and linked to children in a Special school, the 2 classes were working on the author Roald Dahl and the members of each 'mixed' team were displayed in the online work area.

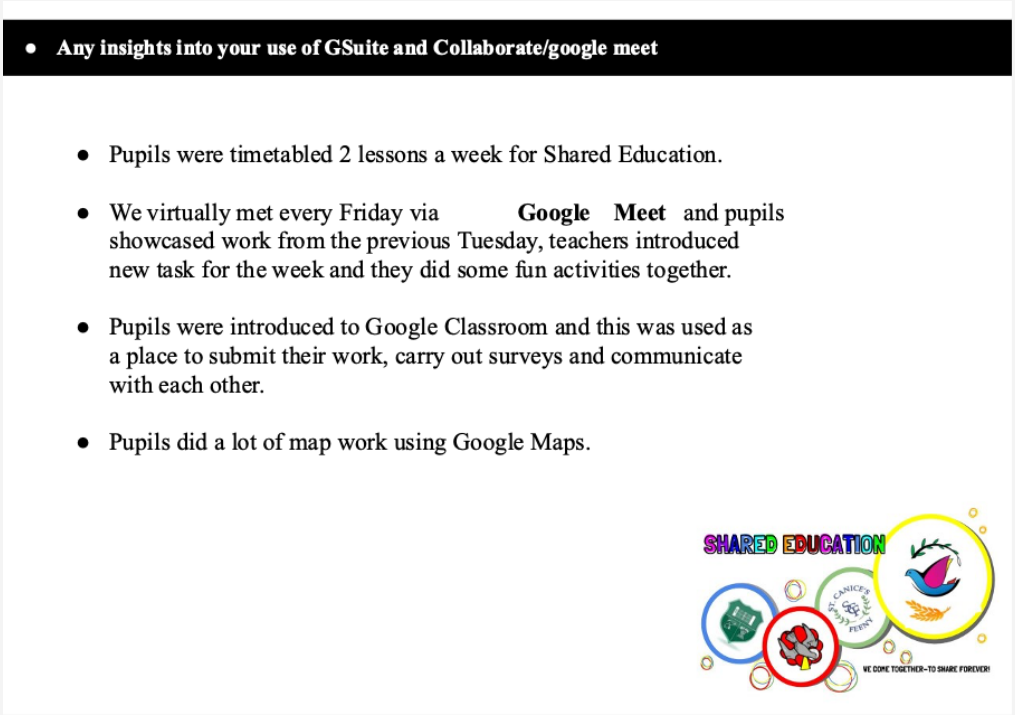
The second theory behind the work was the use of constructivism in that pupils were actively involved in creating new knowledge on a given topic and then either sharing this with their partner school or in some cases planning the work in a collaborative way from the start. Teachers were never expected to teach specific topics; instead, they were expected to identify common areas of the curriculum which were suitable for joint study and with the very clear expectation that the pupils would create an 'end product', whether that was a joint powerpoint presentation, a poster or more recently a co-produced 'ebook' or movie. This has been the case for nearly all pupils from the age of 7 and above. Younger pupils have often made much greater use of synchronous video-conferences like the one shown below.

4. The affordances and provision of technology

Schools in Northern Ireland have the benefit of state-provided hardware, software and internet connectivity, previously called Classroom 2000 or C2K. Paid for through a public-private partnership, it gives all schools a core ICT provision which schools can supplement through their own resources. This means that teachers can rely on the service to plan blended learning with some confidence; since schools are still far from having one device per pupil, teachers have had to show real flexibility in making sure that their classes have sufficient access to hardware for ALL participating children to feel involved.

Software to enable pupil-pupil interaction has steadily evolved since 2016; in 2022, all schools in Northern Ireland have either Office 365 software or Google classroom. Partner schools choose one or other of these platforms and this means they can use both synchronous video-conferencing tools and asynchronous tools such as online discussion or tools that enable the pupils to create resources, and to work as a team in this process.

This process was captured by 2 teachers in the following slide which shows the range of tools that were used in Google classroom.

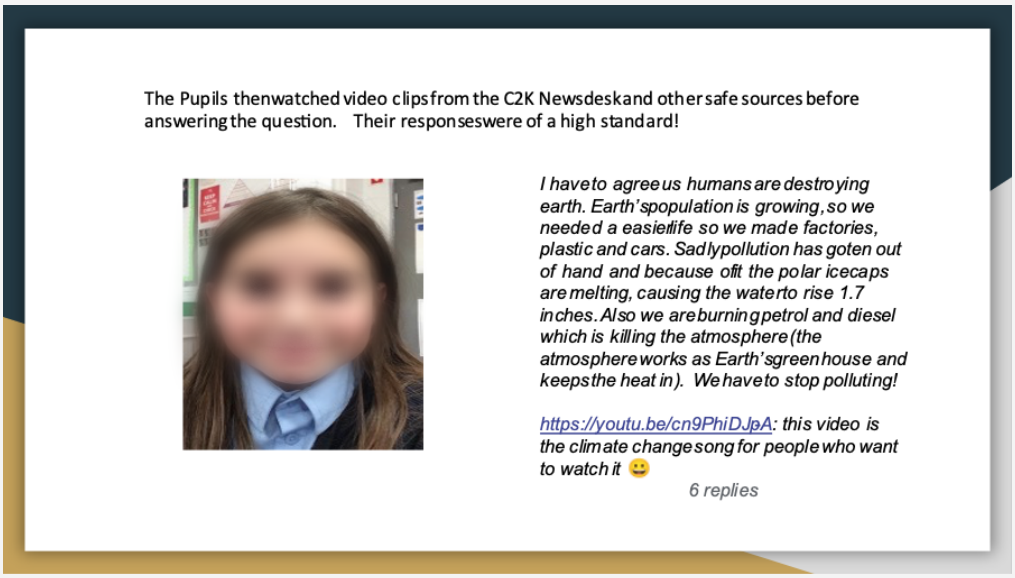


5. The importance of social interaction

Many schools take the view that since the purpose of Shared Education is about understanding similarities and differences between children who may not know each other very well if at all, it's important that children have space to get to know each other as human beings before they start curricular work. In some cases this means sharing personal information in a protected private space created by their teachers and in accordance with the schools' overall policies about safe use of the internet

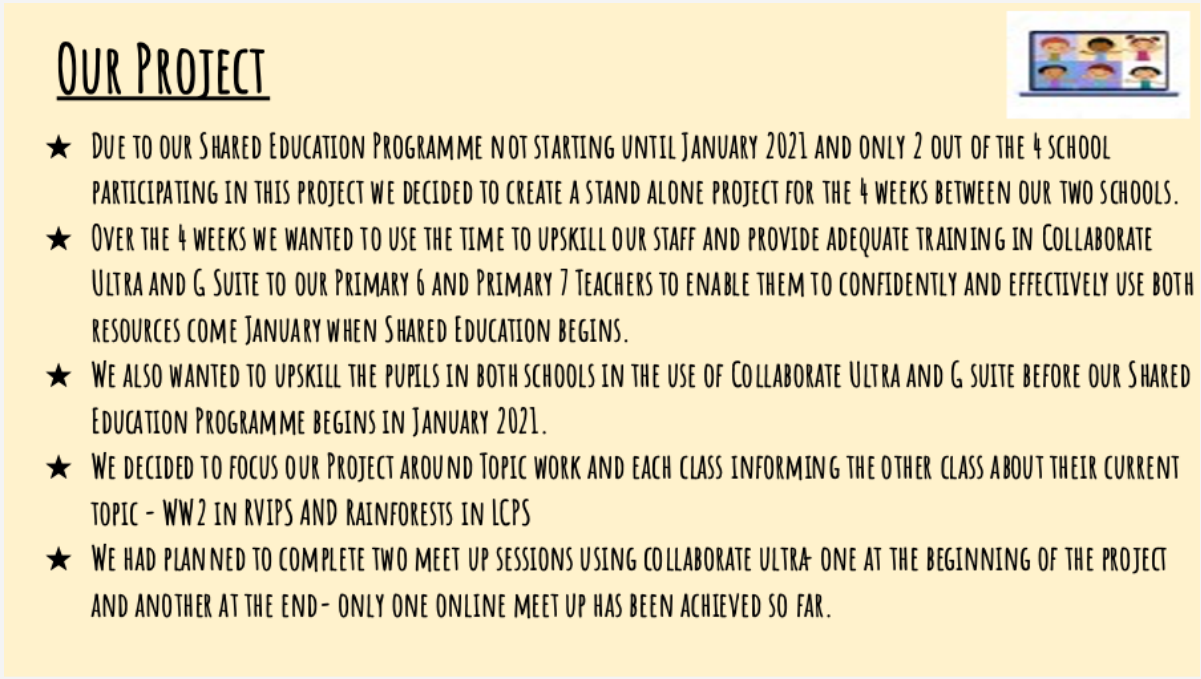
This focus on the social dimension also means that teachers encourage high levels of interaction between pupils using online discussion platforms. In one partnership the 2 teachers had set their combined classes the challenge of responding to a question on whether humans were destroying the planet. It provoked high levels of written comment in the online discussion, as evidenced below

.



6. Moving from 'exchange' to 'collaboration'

When schools begin working together, they often start with an 'exchange' of information about the work they are doing, even when they have been working on different topics. The image below from two schools whose plans had been disrupted by COVID gives an example of this.



Our Project

- ★ Due to our Shared Education Programme not starting until January 2021 and only 2 out of the 4 school participating in this project we decided to create a stand alone project for the 4 weeks between our two schools.
- ★ Over the 4 weeks we wanted to use the time to upskill our staff and provide adequate training in Collaborate Ultra and G Suite to our Primary 6 and Primary 7 Teachers to enable them to confidently and effectively use both resources come January when Shared Education begins.
- ★ We also wanted to upskill the pupils in both schools in the use of Collaborate Ultra and G suite before our Shared Education Programme begins in January 2021.
- ★ We decided to focus our Project around Topic work and each class informing the other class about their current topic - WW2 in RVIPS and Rainforests in LCPS
- ★ We had planned to complete two meet up sessions using collaborate ultra- one at the beginning of the project and another at the end- only one online meet up has been achieved so far.

But as the teachers get to know each other and start thinking about how to extend the collaborative side of their work, they often teach the same topic at the same time and break down learning activities so that mixed teams of pupils have clear plans that they can do together. In the case below, this included using Google sites for the pupils to create their own website about the Titanic; the pupils have moved from just being consumers of online information to creators of online knowledge.

Google Classroom

PART 1

Explain the Google Site Challenge - pupils in their Shared Education groups will work together to design and populate their own Titanic website, scaffolded key headings (see lesson plan).

Show modelled Google sites and the Titanic template site already set up. Give pupils a chance to explore a Google Site.

Begin with agreed online discussion on Google Classroom where groups from both schools type their thoughts regarding the 'aesthetics' of their website - theme, colour, font, layout etc.

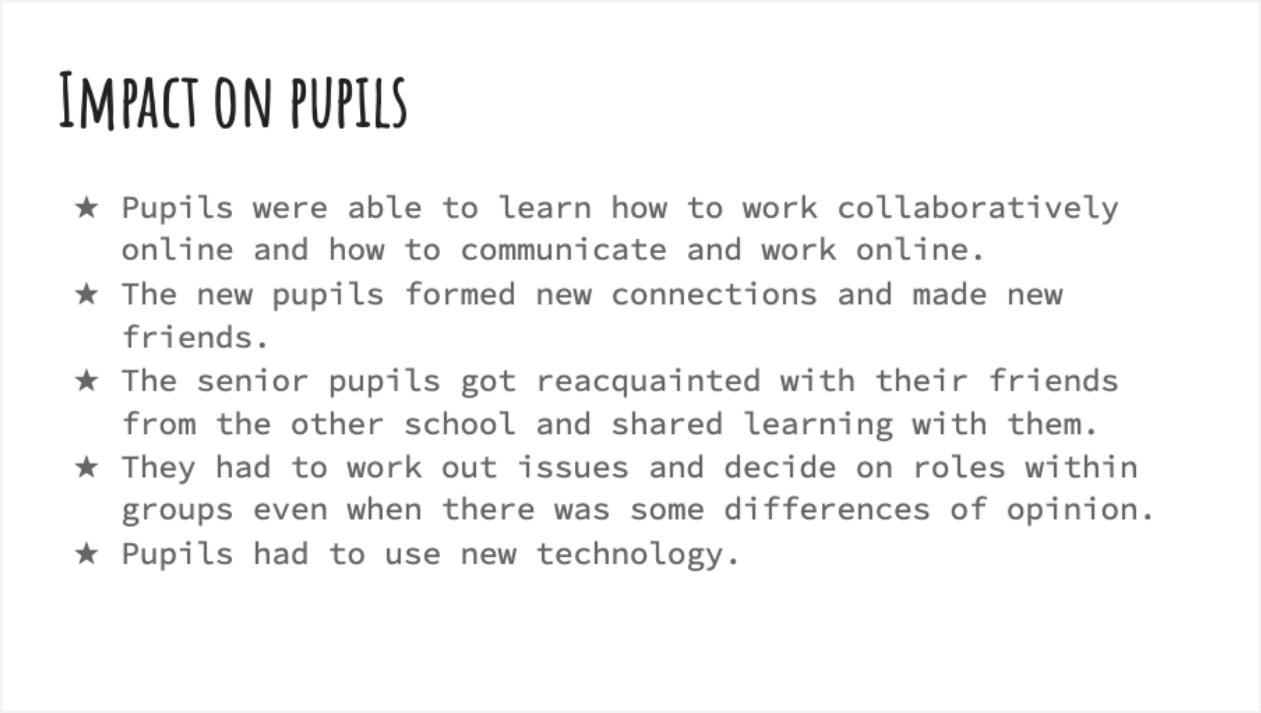
Each pair then upload their shared crest (completed prior to this) to their Google Site so that there are two crests per group. This will be done using their agreed layout discussed in the online discussion. Each pair will then add a caption about their crest.

PART 2

Online discussion with groups regarding their group All About Us blurbs. Agree on one person to type the content on to the Google Site, whilst still discussing and editing as they go.

7. Impact

Teachers are asked to provide a summary of this type of work on their pupils, as in the example below from two schools in the border counties of Ireland. More formal external evaluation from Austin and Turner (2020) and Hunter and Austin (2021) has confirmed a wide range of benefits for both pupils and teachers.

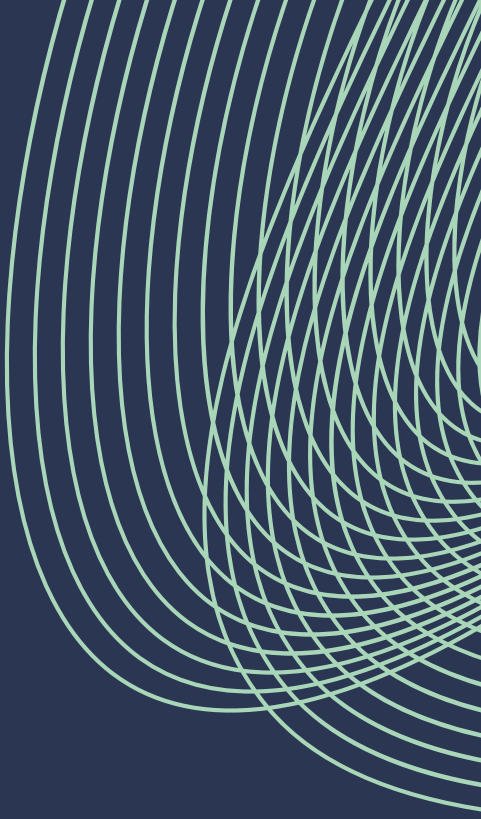


8. Conclusion

Using blended learning in work of this kind, even when schools are relatively close to each other, makes it possible for contact between pupils to take place much more frequently than face to face visits. And we know that frequency of contact is one of the key factors in building trust, a core outcome in intercultural education like this. But blended learning has two other advantages; first, the online element costs the schools nothing since hardware, software and wifi connectivity are all covered in the managed service provided to schools in Northern Ireland. In this sense, links between schools can become far more sustainable if funding for face-to-face contact is reduced or withdrawn.

Finally, as more schools are drawn into the Shared Education programme, including those that are geographically distant, the environmental impact of extra bus travel to connect pupils can be off set by making greater use of online engagement. Teachers who have had the greatest benefit from blended learning in shared education are those who planned their online work and their face to face work together to ensure that learning activities were fully coordinated and complemented each other.

9. Schools which took part in the CLOSER or DOLCE courses between 2019 and 2022

Abbot's Cross PS
Abercorn PS
Ampertaine PS
Ashfield Boys' High School
Ballycarrickmaddy PS
Ballymoney Model IPS
Ballymore NS
Ballywalter PS
Ben Madigan PS
Blackmountain PS
Blessed Patrick O'Loughran PS
Bloomfield PS
Bridge IPS
Bushvalley PS
Camphill PS
Christ the King PS
Cliftonville IPS
Creavery PS
Creggan PS
Donaghey PS
Donoughmore NS
Drumlins IPS
Drumrane PS
Dún Dealgan NS
Glencraig IPS
Grange PS
Groggan PS
Hardy Memorial PS
Holy Cross College
Holy Rosary PS
Holywood PS
Hunt NS
Jones Memorial PS
Kingsmills PS
Knockevin SS
Knocknagoney PS
Limavady Central PS
Lissan PS
Mary Queen of Peace PS
Millington PS
Millquarter PS
Mitchell House School
Mossley PS
Moyle PS
Murroe NS
Nettlefield PS
Olderfleet PS
Orchard County PS
Our Lady of Lourdes PS
Portaferry IPS
Roe Valley IPS
Sacred Heart PS
Saints & Scholars IPS
Scoil Chlann Naofa
Scoil Cholmcille/Murroe NS
Scoil Eoin Pól
Scoil Mhuire gan Smál
Scoil na gcailini
SN San Nioclas
St. Anthony's PS
St. Bernard's PS
St. Canice's PS
St. Ciaran's PS
St. Columba's PS Straw Draperstown
St. Francis PS
St. John's PS
St. Joseph's PS
St. Louis NS
St. MacNissi's PS
St. Malachy's PS
St. Mary's NS
St. Mary's PS Mullaghbawn
St. Matthew's PS
St. Patrick's PS
St. Patrick's PS Glen
St. Ronan's PS
St. Safan's NS
Strabane Academy
Urbleshanny NS
Walker Memorial PS
Welchtown NS
Whitehead PS

We value the partnership we have with the Education Authority and in particular the support of C2k and CASE programme staff