

We'll take the Silk Road

An inspiring theme has helped pupils and teachers across Scotland to weave creative new ways around Curriculum for Excellence.

By **Douglas Blane** Photography **Chris James**



It sounds like they are setting out from Samarkand to China, on a caravan of camels, laden with precious goods to sell. But for pupils and teachers at Grange Campus, Kilmarnock, and four other Scottish schools, their Silk Road experience is happening closer to home – it's a journey of the imagination, tied together by Tapestry.

The interdisciplinary aspects of Curriculum for Excellence are a challenge for secondaries, says John O'Dowd of the Tapestry Partnership. "Our Silk Road project

for first-years and upper-primary pupils aims to tackle that, not just in obvious subjects like art and music, but in modern languages, social subjects, science, numeracy, literacy, health and well-being."

Making connections between their local experiences and the wider world helps motivate youngsters, he says. "There's a Silk Road connection with a plant called gutta-percha, for example. Remember the 'gutties' you wore in PE? Grange discovered this while researching in the local library. Another school found

RICHER ROUTE
The Silk Road project has opened up new journeys in interdisciplinary learning for pupils at the Grange Campus in Kilmarnock

that the Paisley pattern was based that grew near Babylon."

Each department at the school v to offer suggestions for using the their subject, says science transiti Morag Ferguson. "We decided t with outdoor learning, to learn : men who travelled the Silk Roa plants and bring them back to Br

"We looked especially at plar George Forrest, because there's connection there – he lived in marnock, and in our catchment :



◀ We've been unravelling that story and are now making a border with the plants he brought back that you can find in everybody's garden – camellia, spirea, primula, clematis. There's good science there, but it's not a topic I'd ever have thought of going into myself."

That teachers are forced to take fresh perspectives is one advantage of using an external agency like Tapestry, they say. "The people at Tapestry are out and about, going into other schools and areas. They have the ability, time and expertise. There are so many areas you can tap into in my subject, if you have the knowledge," explains Kerry Leach, principal teacher of art.

"We need to keep learning from other people. If you're inspired, you'll be a motivating and inspirational teacher yourself."

Working with five curricular areas breaks down barriers, says technical teacher Paul McGurn. "It's a misconception that my subject is just about making things. There's the whole design and presentation side, which we've been working on. I see the approach other teachers take to group discussions, for instance, and then use that in my classes. It's about core skills that are useful across the subjects."

Another advantage is the focus the project brings, says Graeme Crosby, principal teacher of VCOP (vocabulary, connectives, openers, punctuation) and transition. "It means when I'm working on literacy across the curriculum, I'm not looking at tenuous links, but at how literacy fits into real lessons."

"Before I might have said to Paul: 'I'm doing something in English that could fit into technical', this has had us planning around the Silk Road as a focus. The links are built in. It has made literacy across the curriculum much more successful."

At this point a spectacular red Chinese dragon, carried on the heads of a dozen youngsters, snakes past the teachers, headed for the outdoors. Grange is a Confucius Hub school, explains headteacher Fred Wildridge, which means pupils learn about aspects of Chinese culture. "At the last Chinese New Year, which is a big thing here, these children and their dragon starred in the town centre. As a school we're trying to weave as many aspects and subjects into the Silk Road as possible."

◯ ne other school in the project is also a Confucius Hub and is building on those insights for the Silk Road, says Mr O'Dowd. "But all the schools are exploring the journey from a starting point of China. They then broaden it to take in the other countries and their music and cultures."

Underpinning the two-year Silk Road project, launched in November 2010 with a small grant from the Scottish government, is a CPD course by Tapestry tutors in two modern teaching philosophies and their associated pedagogies – Teaching for Understanding, and Assessment is for Learning.

The former has its origins at Harvard University with the work of David Perkins, whom Tapestry has brought to Scotland several times to speak to teachers. The aim

VISIONS OF CHINA

Two schools in the project are also Confucius Hubs, adding thematic scope to pupils' learning; below, Grange pupils perform a song using the yang ch'in, a traditional Chinese instrument.



is in-depth understanding, evidenced by the ability to use new knowledge in unscripted ways – such as role-playing a Silk Road trader – rather than simply reproducing it in an exam.

Generative topics is one of the central concepts in teaching for understanding. "The Silk Road is a particularly rich generative topic," says Mr O'Dowd. "It has given the schools a wide range of avenues to explore."

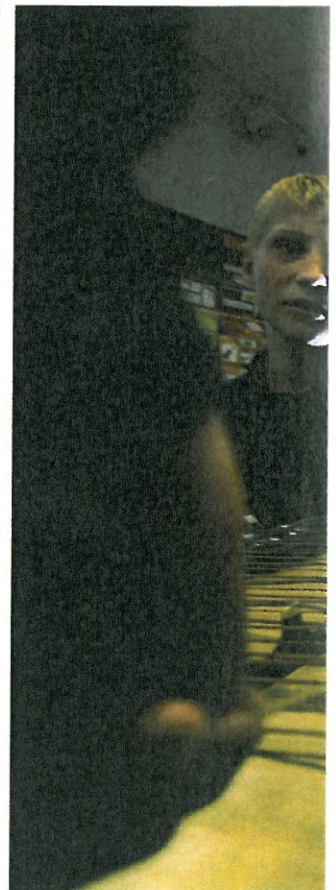
There's more depth to the Silk Road than is common in cross-curricular topics, confirm the teachers. "It's not just different departments doing their own thing on the same topic," says Mary Mackinnon, principal teacher of English. "What the children learn in one subject is feeding into other subjects. So your success in English depends on what you've learnt in art, which depends on what you've been doing in history. That is very different in my experience."

"In English, for instance, we will be asking them to take everything they now understand about the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, textures and history of the Silk Road and bring that into the richest piece of creative writing they have ever done."

A big contribution from Tapestry has been in linking activities to experiences and outcomes, says principal teacher of music and overall Grange manager for the project, Alan Forrester. "Not only for the different areas we work in, but also for the



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Cross-curricular path hits the right notes

As a first-year project at Grange Academy, the Silk Road had to fit into the new Curriculum for Excellence structure. This involves four elective classes spread over two years, says deputy head Elaine Crawford, as she opens the door to a class in the music department.

"We've got literacy, numeracy, enterprise and global citizenship," she says. "We have split the year-group into four, taught by three members of staff from different departments, so it's cross-curricular. This class might look like music but it's global citizenship, taught by teachers of music, modern languages and social subjects.



Sound innovation.

A couple of pupils squeeze past, carrying a yang ch'in – a type of hammered dulcimer from China, which the school acquired for the project. "I wouldn't say I can play it," says Alan Forrester, principal teacher of music. "I can get a noise out of it. I'm hoping Fiona Campbell, a strings player and modern languages teacher, can."

A nice surprise in Curriculum for Excellence, say the Grange teachers, is that the whole teacher gets involved as well as the whole child,

and can bring interests and expertise from beyond their subject area to the class. That confluence of teacher and pupil interests makes for motivating lessons, says Mrs Campbell.

"It was the pupils' idea to look at the national anthems of countries along the Silk Road. They're learning to sing them and we have talked about the meanings of the lyrics. They are pretty much all about pride in your country and defeating the enemy."

One pupil, Matthew McConnell of S1, says: "It was different. Usually you're sitting in class, not saying anything, just

writing. Sometimes different can be bad but this was good. Everybody says school is boring and it can be. I have good days and bad days. It would be good to have something different like this every day. It would be unpredictable and I'd like that."

Rosie McGarva (S1) says: "After we did the national anthems we split into groups, chose a country and made a big poster. It had to have opening doors and things you could interact with, not just look at. We got to work in groups, so there were loads of ideas around. I liked it. The Silk Road was more of a route than a road. They went over seas and used camels and boats."

cross-cutting themes. As a school staff we could do that ourselves, of course, but it would take us a long time."

It would be a huge amount of work, agrees principal teacher of maths Steve Taylor. "Eventually we would come up with the same thing. But they have already done it and are sharing it with us, and giving us examples of good practice."

The second educational pillar in the Silk Road project is Assessment for Learning, derived from the work of Dylan William of the Institute of Education in London. Tapestry has brought him to Scotland, too, to talk to teachers as part of the project's professional development. Particular techniques are one aspect of this, says music teacher Cara Sullivan.

"We've been using the random name generator for questioning in class, rather than having the same kids putting up their hands all the time. It gets everyone paying attention, knowing that they might be asked. Another technique that works well is exit passes, for which pupils have to answer questions. Tapestry tells us we should try one of these techniques at a time, until they're working well, then move on while sharing our experiences within the teacher learning communities they have helped us to set up."

The TLCs are organised support groups of teachers from different departments –

without which, Dylan William says, it is much harder to embed formative assessment in classroom practice. Even so, it is likely to take a couple of years. "We now have three of these TLCs at Grange," says Mr Taylor. We meet regularly, observe each other's classes and work on innovative ways of assessing CfE."

It is a kind of support group, says Mrs Sullivan. "It also means that pupils are beginning to notice, and comment on, the same approaches in different classes. You are starting to get that consistency of approach right across the curriculum."

The pupils are also seeing their teachers learning along with them, says Kerry Leach. "It's lifelong learning in action. There's a coming together of ideas, minds and thoughts. We are celebrating achievement all the time, as well as in a big event at the end. It's exciting for staff and pupils. In fact, it's a little bit magical."

Teaching for understanding
<http://learnweb.harvard.edu/alps/tfu/>
Random name generator
http://classtools.net/education-games-php/fruit_machine
Tapestry Partnership
www.tapestrypartnership.co.uk

