

Practical learning in a knowledge-rich curriculum

Hethersett Academy,
Hethersett, Norwich



www.hethersettacademy.org

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Headlines

- Knowledge and culture
- Supporting well-being
- Deliberate practice

About the school

Hethersett Academy is a co-educational 11–16 secondary academy sponsored by the Inspiration Trust.



Making learning whole

Hethersett Academy's vision is to ensure that every student achieves their best, both in academic terms and also as a 'capable and valuable member of the community'¹.

As a member of the Inspiration Trust family of schools, Hethersett Academy shares a curriculum that has subject-specific knowledge at its heart, based on a rich conception of knowledge that includes skills and dispositions. Powerful knowledge is taught 'so that children can understand, access and influence our society'. Children are also taught to critique the knowledge and apply their thinking to complex problems 'to strengthen their intellectual resilience'²

Inspiration Trust highlights the equal importance given by its schools to both a knowledge-rich curriculum and to co-curricular learning.

'We dare to do more for our children. We believe in a knowledge-rich curriculum combined with cultural opportunities, sports, music, and enrichment. We're proud to support schools in some of the region's most disadvantaged areas – we believe every child can succeed.' Gareth Stevens, CEO, Inspiration Trust³:

In support of this vision, an extended school day at Hethersett Academy gives time for increased teaching in core subjects and enrichment opportunities focusing on STEM, creative arts and literacy.

'We take many opportunities to extend learning beyond the classroom. This helps maximise [students'] grades and has transformed their education, opening up so many more opportunities for our students. We are no exam factory: sport, technology and the arts are very important to us.'

Jane Diver, Principal, Hethersett Academy⁴

This approach is endorsed by subject leads at Hethersett Academy.

'I think we're very lucky at Hethersett because our senior leadership team and the Trust we work for value the subjects that we do.' Kate Finlay



Embedding practical learning in the curriculum

Teachers of Design & Technology (D&T), Food & Nutrition (F&N) and art embed practical learning in Hethersett Academy's knowledge-rich curriculum by deciding how the practical elements are most coherently sequenced to support the development and retention of the knowledge they plan to teach, demonstrating a blending of substantive and disciplinary knowledge.

'We always plan for the knowledge that we're going to teach, sometimes we might choose to do a practical task and then deliver the knowledge in a more traditional classroom way, and sometimes the other way round.' Kate Finlay

It is also important to ensure that the practical element of the curriculum is specified in detail.

'The practical work that we do is very focused, with a very clear start and end point, and in design, having that focus means that the practical work is meaningful, and it is building on the students' knowledge.' Kate Finlay

Teacher modelling of a technique or process in demonstrations forms an important initial step in ensuring that students not only understand what outcome they are aiming for but also how to get there in real time.

'A lot of the online resources are speeded up, so the children don't actually understand the element of patience that's needed, or how long those changes actually take, so doing it in real time allows them to recreate that in a practical lesson on their own.' Cara Read

In art, there is a positioning of a period of practical learning in the curriculum, between the initial knowledge input and the student's final visual piece of art. This is key to providing students with opportunities for repeated practice that develops their ability to

analyse an artist's work and explore techniques through their own work.

'We do always start off with knowledge, and it does always end with the practical, but it's that middle bit where they're doing both that I think is the most important in my subject.' Helen Coote

During this middle stage, students simultaneously critique the work of the artist and develop their own artistic style.

'That middle stage, where they're simultaneously planning their ideas but also looking back at that artist and annotating their work...they're referring back to the knowledge and they're practising... it's all about experimentation.' Helen Coote

Students' ability to learn through all their senses, particularly touch, during practical work is important.

'Whether it's DT or Food & Nutrition, they're actually holding the equipment and they're trying it for themselves. You can obviously correct any issues and but it's that idea that they get to feel it for themselves, so they know the correct feeling or the correct motion.' Cara Read

In all three subjects, the teachers ensure that students receive sufficient grounding in knowledge and skills in order to achieve their best results. The D&T department has changed its approach in Key Stage 3 with the GCSE in mind, and rather

than students doing one big project, they do lots of mini-makes.

'That gives them a larger repertoire of skills and at the end of GCSE they have to demonstrate in Food, high level skills, and in Technology, high level skills plus quality of outcome, so they can't do that if they don't have a large skill set.' Kate Finlay

This teaching strategy fosters students' interest and helps to retain their focus on learning.

'By giving them variety, you're giving more chances for every child to find two or three things that they're really great at.' Kate Finlay

And in art, despite the strong knowledge focus, the practical has to be the priority.

'At the end of the year they might have all the knowledge and the ability to analyse artists, but they're not going to succeed at GCSE if they don't have that skill base.' Helen Coote



Learning for the real world

Within a knowledge-rich curriculum, Hethersett Academy teachers ensure that the primary focus for students' learning is the subject knowledge, but they also make sure that the students develop skills to support independent decision-making and life beyond school.

Students begin their GCSE programme in Year 9, so in Art, they start to make personal choices over their work during this year. They record their work in their personal sketchbooks, which they take great care of, and which, by Year 11, represent a significant investment of effort in terms of their learning.

'Students keep their sketchbooks with them all the time, they don't want to leave them because so much has gone into them by the time they get to Year 11, they have so much more independence, and their work is just so personal.' Helen Coote

Students are also given roles in practical classes to enhance their skills in collaborating with others and in taking responsibility. The organisational aspects of practical learning become part of their learning.

'We give them roles, to tidy up, to put the artwork on the drying rack, or washing palettes for their row, things like that are learning for the rest of their lives.' Helen Coote



Using a full range of teaching methods

Teaching practical learning within a knowledge-rich curriculum challenges teachers to ensure that neither the development of knowledge nor of skills is taken for granted, or left to chance, both have to be cultivated in all students. Kate Finlay uses the analogy of 'plaiting' the curriculum to achieve this:

'Its a bit like doing a plait, you start with the really important knowledge and then you're pulling in all the extra bits to widen their curriculum...For me, a knowledge-rich curriculum is where a teacher or a curriculum leader has designed what their students need to know at the correct point in a meaningful way' Kate Finlay

Teachers get to know their students quickly through their constant monitoring of practical work and develop the confidence to intervene when appropriate.

'Practical work is a really great way of seeing how they are developing in a way you just can't do with a non-practical subject, because you can't hide, there's no hiding from it, if you've not done the work, it's not done. Through practical work, you can move the children on a lot quicker.'

Kate Finlay

Furthermore, through their constant conversations with students during practical work, teachers get to know students' interests and capabilities, that enables them to direct students towards specific projects that align with both of these aspects.

'I need to know what artists to give that student. Is that going to push them on enough but not be too scary to put them off? ... Is that going to engage them in what they're interested in outside

of school? Are they interested more in the environment or in culture or fashion?' Helen Coote

This passion for facilitating students' choices is often displayed by teachers using practical learning.

'I'm so invested in their outcomes that I get excited and then they get excited by it as well, and I don't think...that just can't exist when it isn't a practical subject.'

Helen Coote



Cultivating learner agency

Hethersett Academy is no 'exam factory' and students' life skills are as important as their academic achievements. The carefully planned sequencing of subject-focused practical activities, such as those in D&T and art, combined with the rich offering of extra-curricular activities, fosters confidence, self-reliance, resilience and aspiration. All of these qualities enable each student to become 'a responsible and active member of both the school community and their local neighbourhood'.

In F&N, teachers build students' confidence to succeed by developing a solid skill base in the early years, particularly students' understanding of weights and making accurate measurements. Lessons on these aspects in Year 7 ensure that by the time students get to Key Stage 4:

'They are confident and able to follow recipes and you just have

to check in with them rather than lead it, which gives them that independence and confidence.'

Cara Read

In art, teachers prioritise encouraging students to develop their personal style in creating art work by, for example, experimenting with different ways of holding pencils, using brushes, or handling materials, so that they are well prepared to start their final GCSE piece.

'They need to find their own way of doing it... you can't develop at all without it. It's confidence building, ultimately; they might know everything about art, but they don't have the confidence to do it unless they've executed it themselves.'

Helen Coote

Opportunities for students to practice without fear of failure are provided in the in-between spaces, between knowledge input and completing the final task, where most of the learning takes place:

'... because they're applying their knowledge, they've not got that fear of their final piece, because this is the experimentation stage, the middle stage where they are able to explore the materials, how they handle paint or pencils and how to move their arm rather than moving the wrist. It's all those things which need to be taught before they start their final piece.' Helen Coote

Success in practical skills strengthens students' self-belief and enables them to take pride in their work.

'You don't want to do it for them, you want them to do it. You want that sense of achievement from every lesson, so they're walking away feeling "I achieved that outcome."' Cara Read

Practical lessons offer teachers opportunities to build relationships between themselves and students through conversations. These enhance students' ability to communicate more effectively with adults.

'Practical work allows you to create a distraction whereby you can have the social conversations that these children need, because they find talking to adults intimidating.' Kate Finlay

Practical learning gives teachers an opportunity to teach children who find the classroom environment intimidating, but the learning remains knowledge-rich.

'Its more relatable to some of the children who struggle with the classroom environment, or to children who enjoy more of a practical setting.'

Cara Read

Students' aspirations to improve their work are enhanced through seeing demonstrations of work from older students.

'We've got whole walls of displays hanging up, but it's important

that they change. And it's also important that the students see that work, not just the outcome, but they see that outcome in development.'

Helen Coote

Practical work can also be the site of powerful emotions and supports children's mental wellbeing because it breaks down barriers.

'This is such an interesting point about practical work, it's like when people bring in their therapy dogs, because it breaks down that barrier. Practical work does that as well, and probably in more of an emotional way, because they have to be more self-reflective.'

Kate Finlay

Tracking learner progression

Progression in the development of students' practical skills is carefully planned by teachers during Years 9 and 10, so by the time they reach Year 11, students will have had opportunities to practice skills necessary for success at GCSE. Students' frustrations at not succeeding with their first attempts in the earlier years are ameliorated by practice.

'We make it very clear in Year 9 that we're learning, we're practising, nobody does it right first time, because a lot of them can get disheartened... but

they're making those mistakes in Year 9, we'll fix them in Year 10 and then they get to Year 11, that'll be the third attempt.'

Cara Read

Reflecting on these early mistakes is part of the learning process.

'They're reflecting on their own learning. You don't need to prompt that by the time they get to year 10, they can tell me what they would do next time... they're so used to self-correcting and self-checking.'

Cara Read

Because students are making such personal choices that drive the direction of their learning through their practical work, their records in their sketchbooks and photographs of work captured by teachers are important for showing students' learning journey:

'You see it in their sketchbooks, it's the journey of their skills.'

Helen Coote

This growth in students' enjoyment for learning in D&T and Art prompted teachers to persuade parents that these subjects would be good ones for their children to choose, which has been a successful strategy.

'One of the problems we had was that students loved the subject, but they weren't choosing it, so we had a slogan of 'choose what you love' and we pushed it really hard.' Kate Finlay

Part of the parents' reluctance around their children's choice of these subjects was the lack of familiarity with them as taught currently. There was careful preparation made for parents' evenings and transition evenings, that included students' demonstrating making or painting during these and other events. This increased the appreciation of students' talent and the quality of their work among parents and the local community.

'I did an exhibition, part of Norfolk Open Studio, about unfinished work, not necessarily final pieces, and so many members of the community came and were surprised at the quality of work. They have a misconception of what school art looks like, and they were all pleasantly surprised by the quality and the range of it.'

Helen Coote



Endnotes

1. www.hethersettacademy.org/44/school-visionethos
2. [Vision & Values – Inspiration Trust](#)
3. www.inspirationtrust.org/103/welcome-from-the-ceo
4. www.hethersettacademy.org/18/principals-welcome