

Modern studies – a portrait of current practice in Scottish secondary schools 02/02/07



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1. Introduction

Modern studies – a portrait of current practice is one in a series of portraits by HMIE, depicting current practice in key aspects of the Scottish curriculum. The portrait series is a recent initiative by HMIE, flowing from the *Improving Scottish Education* (ISE) report¹. It is intended to promote improvements in Scottish education by drawing on the findings of inspections to stimulate reflection and debate. This portrait explores modern studies in the context of the secondary school curriculum as a key sector within the delivery of the 3 to 18 curriculum. It will be updated periodically to reflect case studies of effective practice.

An important purpose of the portrait series is to relate existing pedagogy and curricular provision to the aspirations of *A Curriculum for Excellence* (ACfE)². By stimulating debate about teaching for effective learning, the portraits will challenge us all to review the extent to which current practice is successfully promoting the four capacities in all young learners.

This portrait is based on evidence obtained from HMIE visits to secondary schools during the period 2002 to 2006. These visits included both general inspections and other visits to examine effective practice. Inspectors evaluated the quality of learning, teaching, meeting pupils' needs and achievement.

2. Improving Scottish Education

Improving Scottish Education (ISE) was published by HMIE in March 2006. This report highlights the need to build on the strengths in Scottish education to meet the needs of learners for the challenges of a global society. The ISE report also stresses the need to improve learners' achievement. These aspects are explored in greater depth in this portrait on modern studies. In particular, it will promote discussion about the need to encourage in young people a greater sense of responsibility and independence, and the need to increase their self-confidence and ability to collaborate in achieving success.

To encourage in young people a greater sense of responsibility and independence, many teachers recognise the potential impact on learners of debating social and political issues. Teachers know that learners are more likely to be engaged and challenged when taking part in meaningful and relevant debates about important aspects of their lives, such as, for example, social change or the closure of a local amenity. So, how well founded are our present approaches on a clear strategy for developing responsibility and independence in all learners? Do schools link effectively with their feeder primary schools to build progress over time? In our school, have teachers considered how, through planning for progression, learners can be increasingly challenged and motivated to become more responsible and independent through their learning in modern studies?

To increase pupils' self-confidence and ability to collaborate in achieving success, many modern studies teachers are providing learning opportunities that require active collaboration and group working, particularly for older pupils. Many pupils will already have been developing these skills at primary school. As teachers of modern studies, have we considered how effectively we develop these skills at S1/S2? Inspectors find that at these stages collaborative tasks are less frequent than at other stages. Increased opportunities for collaboration can build more effectively on prior learning and prepare pupils better for their futures. Specific skills which help

¹ Improving Scottish Education. HM Inspectors of Education 2006

² ACfE - The four capacities : Successful Learners; Confident Individuals; Responsible Citizens; and Effective Contributors

serve this purpose include discussion, debate and developing reasoned arguments and conclusions.

3. A portrait of current practice in teaching for effective learning

Modern studies teachers are increasingly recognising the importance of *A Curriculum for Excellence* (ACfE) in providing opportunities to improve learners' achievement. Modern studies clearly has many strengths which can be built on to help learners develop the four capacities. Whilst ACfE is still at a relatively early stage, many teachers are already exploring how this important national development will help us to develop strategies to support learners more effectively through modern studies. Whilst recognising that modern studies contributes in several ways to the holistic development of individuals, this section of the portrait explores some of the more specific contributions which the subject makes.

How can modern studies help to develop successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors?

Successful Learners

Signpost to successful learners.

Successful learners often display the following characteristics.

- They base reasoned evaluations and justifiable opinions on contemporary social and political evidence.
- They work collaboratively to solve problems concerning complex social and political issues.
- They access and interpret a range of statistical data using ICT where appropriate.

What do we do well presently in modern studies to develop successful learners?

Currently, many effective departments offer a variety of activities which enable pupils to develop an understanding of the political and social influences on their lives. Some of the key strategies which are presently developing pupils as successful learners include the following.

- Teachers enhance pupils' oral communication skills through using a range of contemporary social and political debates that also offer progression in content and debating skills.
- Teachers effectively develop learners' abilities to evaluate the reliability and validity of statistical data and information on which to base decisions.
- Many teachers use information technology to enable learners to develop skills of interrogating databases and accessing relevant information about current affairs.
- Learners are taught to recognise and explain bias and exaggeration in visual, written and spoken sources. They work in groups to come to joint conclusions, based on evidence and consensus. Learners use these skills and opportunities to make individual reasoned evaluations, coming to decisions and justifying opinions based on evidence.
- Learners are given opportunities to apply their skills confidently to new and unknown situations.

How might modern studies contribute more to successful learning?

The extent to which teachers enable and encourage pupils to understand and contribute to the society in which they live varies significantly. As we continue to improve our approaches, as teachers of modern studies we could usefully consider the following questions.

- Do we develop learners' critical thinking skills beyond a basic evaluation of evidence? Do we encourage them to understand how to use social scientific methods of enquiry and give them enough opportunities to interrogate current data?
- Do we enable learners to develop higher order skills of communication such as expressing opinions, offering explanations or justifying reasoned arguments based on their findings?
- Do we sufficiently raise learners' expectations and ensure lively, focused debates and discussions about topical social and political issues?
- Do we challenge all learners to give opinions and justify them with evidence, and to carry out increasingly challenging research or methods of enquiry?
- Do we develop strong links with the other curriculum areas to facilitate planned progression and continuity from P7 to S2, particularly in the development of skills?
- In role play and simulation exercises, do we ensure learners appreciate and take account of practical economic and political constraints when making decisions?

Confident Individuals

Signpost to confident individuals.

Confident individuals often display the following characteristics.

- They can express personal views on the local and global society in which they live.
- They engage fully in decision-making exercises.
- They participate in social and political debate and discussion in a positive and reasoned manner.

What do we do well presently in modern studies to develop confident individuals?

Many teachers are using a variety of effective approaches which enable learners to become increasingly confident. Some of the key strategies which are presently developing confident individuals include the following.

- Teachers provide challenging tasks in which success develops high levels of confidence in learners' social scientific skills.
- By encouraging and promoting early engagement in political debate in school and the local community, teachers help learners to develop their confidence to contribute fully as they grow older.
- Group work in modern studies is exploited by teachers as a particularly valuable context in which pupils learn how to relate to others and become aware of their own actions and impact.

- Through careful planning, teachers are helping learners to develop the confidence to make decisions based on contemporary social and political evidence, taking account of the views of others.

How might modern studies contribute more to developing confident individuals?

The extent to which we adjust our approaches to meet learners' needs through assessment, teaching and learning varies. As we continue to improve our approaches, as teachers of modern studies we could usefully consider the following questions.

- To what extent do we share with learners the concepts underpinning coursework and explain the nature and limitations of evidence so that they become more confident in their use of social scientific skills?
- Do we provide enough opportunities for learners to develop confidence in communication through discussions and debates, enabling them to form and justify views and decisions based on current social and political evidence?
- Do we encourage confidence in written communication and organised written argument through regular practice in essay and report writing at an earlier stage?

Responsible Citizens

Signpost to responsible citizens.

Responsible citizens often display the following characteristics.

- They engage with complex political, social and economic issues in an appropriate manner.
- They understand their own and other's rights and responsibilities and promote them appropriately.
- They use their knowledge of how Scotland relates to the rest of the world in social, political and economic terms to improve the community in which they live.

What do we do well presently in modern studies to develop responsible citizens?

Modern studies is making a major contribution to learners' knowledge and political understanding, providing a sound and necessary knowledge base about effective citizenship. Many modern studies teachers are developing this knowledge base and using it to improve citizenship skills within and outwith their departments. Some of the key characteristics which are presently developing responsible citizens include the following.

- Many teachers take the opportunity to extend learners' understanding of the importance of active citizenship through coursework.
- Many learners develop an understanding of political citizenship by participating in mock elections and through discussing and debating political issues with a range of outside speakers from political parties, pressure groups and local authority services.
- Learners are given opportunities to explore current knowledge and understanding of the contemporary political, social and economic world and Scotland's place in it.

- Many learners become actively involved in global citizenship by supporting aid charities and debating issues around the politics of aid.
- Teachers ensure learners develop informed, ethically based views on a broad range of complex contemporary issues.
- Teachers use up-to-date contexts to enhance pupils' views with trips to local council offices or the Scottish Parliament.
- Learners are consistently encouraged to practise active citizenship beyond the modern studies department by writing to elected representatives about issues which affect them, or perhaps by giving presentations to the School Board.

For further information about citizenship, you may wish to refer to HMIE's recently published portrait on Education for Citizenship.

How might modern studies contribute more to developing responsible citizens?

Learning is most effective when it is contextualised. Teachers know that learners need opportunities to develop their skills as responsible citizens, and they also recognise the need to proactively encourage them to use their knowledge in real-life situations. As we continue to improve our approaches, as teachers of modern studies we could usefully consider the following questions.

- To what extent do we follow up the theoretical study of the political process and social issues with real-life opportunities for learners to practise being responsible citizens and taking part in political and social processes in a controlled manner?
- Do we ensure learners at all stages listen to and engage with outside speakers?
- Do the resources we use enable all learners to develop an understanding of the contemporary world and their place in it?
- As well as ensuring young people understand the world they will live in as adults, does learning promote a full understanding of the role young people play in the political, social and economic world in which they are a part of when still at school?

Effective Contributors

Signpost to effective contributors.

Effective contributors often display the following characteristics.

- They communicate well orally, in writing and using ICT.
- They apply their knowledge to new situations in decision making exercises.
- They develop resilience and self-reliance through participation in vibrant debate and discussion.

What do we do well presently in modern studies to develop effective contributors?

Many teachers take every opportunity to encourage learners to participate in the society in which they live. Learning about effective contributions to society takes place in a variety of ways, with opportunities for learners to contribute to the local community and, importantly, to experience the difference their contributions can make. The strategies identified in this section link directly to those already mentioned in the context of the capacities discussed earlier in this portrait. This shows the integrative nature of the ways in which teachers develop the four capacities in learners through modern studies. Some of the key strategies which are presently developing effective contributors include the following.

- Learners are encouraged to participate in a range of experiences such as charitable activities or the organisation of school council elections. Teachers recognise that learners who engage in these activities are likely to continue to develop the skills required to become effective contributors to society.
- Many teachers ensure that all pupils contribute to class or group discussions through promoting the skills of active listening and encouraging critical questioning. They may create mock scenarios where groups of learners work together to solve complex global problems.
- Teachers encourage learners to participate actively in the social and political life of the school. Learners may be encouraged to lobby the school council or access the views of the chair of the local education committee.
- Learners in some schools organise fund-raising events and link them to their learning about the politics of world poverty, food, and care of the elderly.
- Some teachers organise debates and debating teams which challenge learners, encouraging them to think creatively and communicate to different audiences, perhaps across groups of schools.

How might modern studies contribute more to developing responsible citizens?

Learners are more likely to become effective contributors if they experience the rewards and challenges of contributing to the society in which they live. By experiencing the highs and lows within a school learning environment, learners will increasingly develop the confidence to contribute actively themselves to society. As we continue to improve our approaches, as teachers of modern studies we could usefully consider the following questions.

- Do we create relevant opportunities to extend learning beyond the classroom and encourage pupils to learn by contributing to the society in which they live?

- Do we provide sufficiently varied opportunities to develop learners as effective contributors? To what extent do extended project-based tasks, problem-solving scenarios, and greater collaboration between learners feature in our programmes to promote and support the development of critical thinking and creativity?
- Do we use a sufficiently varied range of teaching approaches and styles to challenge learners and to support them in developing the resilience and self-reliance which characterises an effective contributor?

4. Conclusion

Modern studies has a key role to play in the modern curriculum. It provides a sound context for learners to develop an awareness of the social and political issues they will meet in their lives. It can help them to:

- understand the democratic process and how and why people participate in society;
- be aware of their rights and responsibilities as local and global citizens;
- understand the nature and processes of conflict resolution at all levels;
- have an increasing awareness of social issues and ways of addressing needs; and
- develop the ability to critically appraise and evaluate important sources of evidence.

Teaching for effective learning in modern studies has many strengths. To build further on these strengths, in addition to the issues raised throughout this portrait, consideration should be given to the following key questions.

- Are the learning experiences for learners imaginative, creative, stimulating and challenging?
- Do we promote independent learning using ICT and relevant interactive social scientific sources?
- Do we build learners' confidence by sharing the purposes of lessons and discussing with them key ideas which underpin the subject?
- Do we give learners enough practical opportunities to develop the aspects of citizenship which we teach in the subject?