# curriculum for excellence
# building the curriculum 2 – active learning
# a guide to developing professional practice

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Throughout this paper, the term 'school' is taken to include pre-school centres, residential and day special schools (including secure provision) and primary and secondary schools. The term 'teacher' in this document is used to refer to all teaching staff including pre-school practitioners, college lecturers, Community Learning and Development (CLD) staff and other relevant practitioners.

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## What is Building the Curriculum 2 about?

*Building the Curriculum 2* is a brief and helpful document that emphasises the importance of active learning in early years and encourages centres and schools to use such approaches consistently.

While it was valuable to emphasise its importance to the early years, active learning is central to all stages of Curriculum for Excellence. The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to build on and extend the advice that it offers.

## What does it say?

*Building the Curriculum 2* talks about active learning in terms of

> Spontaneous play

> Planned and purposeful play

> Investigating and exploring

> Events and life experiences

> Focused learning and teaching

If active learning is defined as being learning where the learner is responsible for instigating, planning or managing what they do[1], then all of these approaches are relevant at every stage. Thus active learning can include designing experiments, testing hypotheses, presenting information and ideas, establishing investigations, undertaking creative work in art, music or dance or any other activity where learners are given greater independence and control over what they do and how they learn.

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1   Active learning also applies to learning where teachers are responsible for instigating, planning and managing what the learner does in a way which involves the learner actively e.g. through engaging the learner in dialogue, asking questions, posing problems, setting stimulating tasks, encouraging investigations and through cooperative learning approaches.

Learner engagement is at the heart of *Curriculum for Excellence*. Its purpose is to ensure that students can learn effectively and cope with new and changing situations. It has to involve regular opportunities to acquire and rehearse the skills that only come from learning actively.

Role play is a good example of this. It can help learners build confidence and establish empathy and understanding and is not restricted to early years. There are excellent examples of older children adopting the roles of historical characters or being asked to respond as scientists in order to apply learning and develop understanding.

The message of *Building the Curriculum 2*, that "approaches to fostering learning need to be flexible to take account of the needs of the child", applies at all levels. It would be wrong if young people were more in control of, and independent in, their learning at the early stage than in the senior phase.

This approach is reflected in much of the practice in schools across Scotland, but there is a consensus that we focus too much on preparation for examinations as learners progress through schools. Significant numbers of young people can be reluctant to take responsibility for learning as they move through secondary schools.

## What is new or different?

Neither *Building the Curriculum 2* nor this paper implies a radical change in direction for most teachers. There is increasing good practice in early years that will be reinforced and encouraged. Furthermore, at other stages, teachers currently use active approaches to lesser or greater extents. The implication is that we need to ensure greater consistency and to support teachers to adapt their approaches to the outcomes that they are trying to achieve through *Curriculum for Excellence*.

*Building the Curriculum 2* focuses on the early years. It, therefore, portrays children as coming to understand their environment largely through the medium of play. For older learners, this will not generally be relevant. However, the underlying point that deep learning involves constructing meaning or making sense remains of great importance.

The activity in active learning is cognitive even when, as in the case of very young children, physical action may also be involved. In other words, active learning always involves a conscious act of thinking. This is a *constructivist* form of pedagogy. As Jerome Bruner, one of the most significant constructivist thinkers, said, the aim was "to establish meaning as the central concept" and discover what "meaning-making processes" are involved in learning.

These "meaning-making" processes occur in the mind of the learner. The teacher can provide an environment conducive to learning, provide the learner with powerful and motivating experiences, diagnose difficulties and offer encouragement and support. However, it is the learner who ultimately has to take ownership of the learning process and engage in an act of creating meaning. All this has profound implications for the role of the teacher.

## What actions do you need to take?

The reflective questions in *Building the Curriculum 2* should be adapted and applied at all stages as they can help create the context and conditions for active learning.

> What steps do you take to ensure continuity of experience, learning and curriculum between stages within school and across subjects and activities?

> How do you support learners to build relationships, act appropriately within these and adapt to new environments and situations?

> How do you plan an environment and climate where learners feel safe and confident to tackle new challenges and take risks, and where trial and error are viewed as a normal part of the learning process?

> How do you decide what mix of activities is appropriate to meet the stage of development and learning of students?

> In what ways do you provide an environment and ethos that encourages a positive sense of self and others and respects diversity?

> What strategies do you have in place to ensure that, where necessary, learners receive appropriate help from external services and partner agencies?

> How do you provide opportunities for students to apply learning in "real life" situations?

> How well do you use assessment to plan progression in learning?

> How do you identify, and take account of, learning that has taken place outside school and in other areas within school?

Essentially, *Building the Curriculum 2* encourages self-evaluation reflective questions which could readily be part of an exercise based on "Journey to Excellence" or "How Good is our school?" Schools and Centres need to take account of the different opportunities that young people have for learning through the Internet and other forms of Information and Communication Technology. These offer learning that is potentially active and, directed sensibly, encourage a research-based approach. They also need to take account of the requirement in *Building the Curriculum 5* for "breadth, depth and application". This demands learning in a range of styles and contexts and therefore a mixed approach in teaching methodology at all stages.

As well as the reflective questions above, schools and centres should also think about how they model and support active learning and enquiry. This can involve less directive approaches and encourage teachers to make clear that they are also learners, working together with pupils to find answers and solutions. Again, this helpfully reinforces much of the work that schools have been doing to improve teaching and learning. Important elements of this are

> ensuring that students can reflect on their learning and are aware of the concepts, skills and understanding that they have acquired so that they can deploy them in different contexts

> encouraging learners to work cooperatively

> involving them in planning their learning

> giving learners the opportunity to raise questions and prompt enquiries.

Teachers will also wish to reflect on how far they make use of the various active learning strategies that have been developed over the years. These are often to be found within customised programmes such as Co-operative Learning, the Harvard Teaching for Understanding programme and, indeed, Assessment is for Learning. Many of these, however, can be summarised in general terms as in the following list:

> Learning often takes place best in authentic real-world settings rather than in the abstract setting of the classroom

> Learning involves moving progressively from concrete examples to the use of symbolic representations

> Practical experience provides a secure basis for subsequent theory

> A task that is beyond – but only slightly beyond – the learner's current capability offers a fruitful opportunity for ensuring progress

> Learners need the opportunity both to ask and answer questions

> Learners benefit from sharing and 'performing' their understandings

> There is an important social dimension to learning. Discussion and small group work have value

> Open-ended questions provoke thought and reflection more powerfully than questions with simple factual answers

> Time needs to be set aside for reflection and metacognition i.e. thinking and talking about the process of learning. Dialogue and interaction are powerful means of promoting learning.

> Opportunities should be taken to discuss with learners the nature of their own thinking

> Teaching is a particularly powerful learning experience. Learners benefit from having the opportunity to teach each other

> Challenge is essential but the experience of success is highly motivating

*Building the Curriculum 2* asks staff to think carefully about the learning environment and reinforces the commitment made elsewhere in *Curriculum for Excellence* documentation to undertake learning outside the classroom and to consider the organisation of the classroom to promote more active learning. This should include organising access to resources for learners. Finally, teachers and others need to think about how they create time for observing and recording progress and building in time for planning.

## In conclusion

*Building the Curriculum 2* is concerned with one of the key aspects of *Curriculum for Excellence development*; learning that goes beyond the acquisition of factual knowledge and embracing understanding and the application of knowledge. This is what is implied in the curriculum design principle 'depth'.

Deep learning involves an active process whereby the learner makes sense of his/her experience. Creating meaning in this way is at the heart of active learning.

Young children are usually adept at developing an understanding of their world in this way. However, there is nothing about the concept of active learning that is specific to the early years. On the contrary, it is fundamental to successful learning at any age.

http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/buildingyourcurriculum/policycontext/btc/index.asp

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