KWL GRIDS: PUPIL VOICE IN ACTION

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'Pupil voice' is currently a trendy phrase in education – its popularity follows the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) – and it can involve pupils in decision-making within their school. Here, Richard focuses on pupil input into topic planning using KWL grids.

KWL grids

KWL grids are learning tools – structural or graphic organisers – in which pupils are asked to record at the start of a topic what they already know ('K') about it, what they want ('W') to know or learn, and, at the end of the topic, what they have learnt ('L') (Figure 1). The K and W sections set the scene for subsequent work, while the L section can be completed at the end of a unit to focus pupil attention on what they have learnt.

Prior knowledge and effective questioning

Pupil involvement in planning is a characteristic of 'constructivist' learning environments. Here teachers introduce and explain new concepts, using the knowledge their pupils already possess, and help them to build bridges to new understanding. When a new topic is introduced most pupils will bring some prior knowledge (however limited or even inaccurate that knowledge might be) and the teacher's job is to activate it.

Wray and Lewis (1997) argue that, in order for real learning to take place, we have to ensure that learners are able to draw upon knowledge they already have about a subject. Therefore, the question, 'What do we know about this topic?' is the obvious one to ask. Here, the K part of the KWL grid can be used as a recording device for an oral discussion. It is one method of creating a tangible, shared record of information, which might otherwise be lost, and that pupils can review later. In addition to recording what pupils know, a KWL grid provides the teacher with information about what they do *not* know (and any possible misconceptions) about the topic. This is useful for planning purposes as well as leading on to the W section.
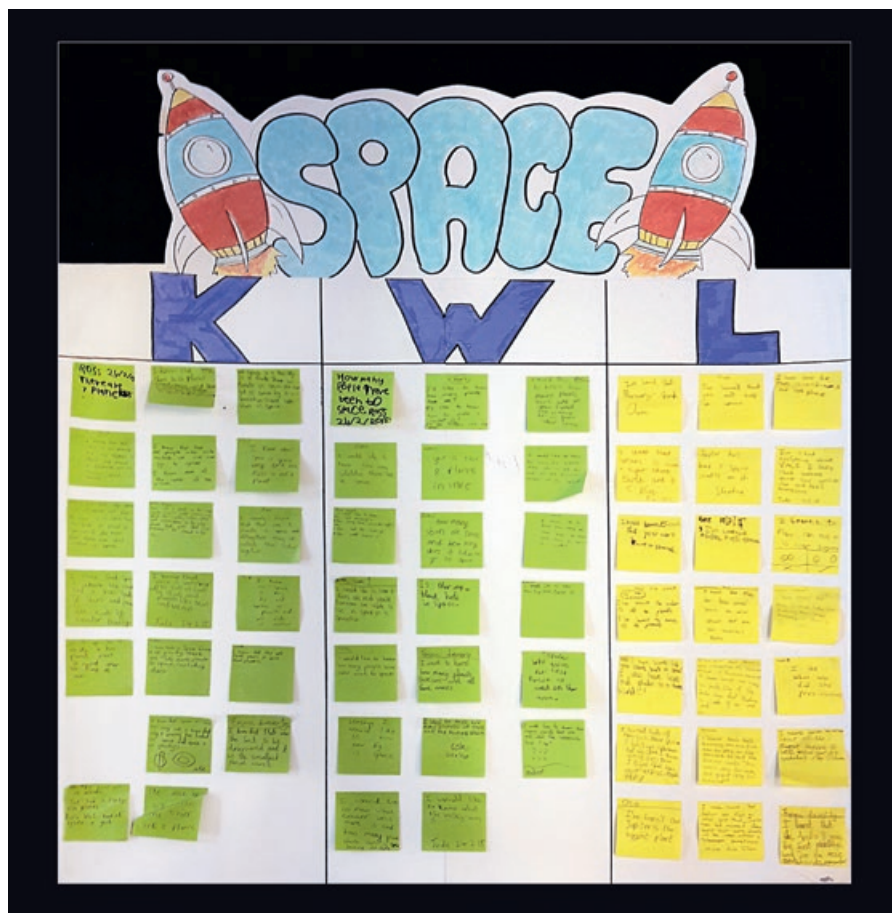

Figure 1: KWL grids are a method of recording what pupils already know ('K') about the topic, what they want ('W') to know or learn, and, at the end of the topic, what they have learnt ('L'). Photo © Richard Greenwood.

Effective questioning has always been an important part of the teacher's armoury. Good teachers are always pleased when their pupils ask thoughtful questions, but how can we get pupils to express such 'cravings' in a more formal way, and how can the pupils see their questions being recorded and acted upon? Giving pupils the opportunity to think, to ask questions and to apply their previous knowledge is a vital part of pupils beginning to take more control over their learning.

Some pupils find it difficult to ask questions, perhaps because they are not used to doing so. Having the opportunity to contribute in this way can be disconcerting. However, in the 'enquiry classroom' asking questions is viewed as a valuable element in the learning process, rather than evidence of confusion or ignorance. To maximise the effectiveness of an enquiry environment, the classroom needs to be stimulating and nurturing – a 'safe place' in which any questions asked are valued.

A geographical example

Shandomo (2009) provides an interesting example of the successful use of a KWL exercise on cross-cultural learning, with 6–8-year-old pupils from Buffalo, New York State. The grids were created during a project on Zambia. The American pupils made direct contact by letter with Zambian school pupils. At the outset of the Zambia topic, the American pupils created a class KWL grid to record what they thought they knew about Africa in general and about Zambia in particular. The pupils also listed the questions they wished to ask their Zambian counterparts (W section). The letters were exchanged, and the differences and similarities in the lives of the two sets of pupils were explored and recorded in the L section. Shandomo concluded that the KWL exercise and the letter writing allowed the American pupils to overcome any initial stereotypes, acquire a broader view of the world and increase their social and cultural awareness.

Teacher and student opinions – positive and negative

Over the last few years I have carried out research in Northern Ireland into teachers' and teacher education students' use of, and opinions about, pupil involvement in planning; specifically, in the use of KWL grids.

A total of 224 teachers responded to a questionnaire, one section of which concerned pupil planning. In addition, over a five-year period, primary teacher education students were asked to report on those occasions when they used pupil-based planning techniques with classes during school placements.

The majority of the responses from both sources were positive: teachers reported that their pupils had reacted 'favourably', 'enthusiastically' or 'with enjoyment'. Frequently used descriptors were, 'excellent', 'very good', 'very useful' and 'extremely important', and the reports described 'increased motivation', 'ownership', and 'increased interest and enjoyment'. One year 4 teacher commented, 'Pupils enjoy active involvement and the power they have to drive the topic', while a student teacher reported, 'The pupils came up with many questions and they couldn't wait to find the answers'.

Some of the teacher respondents expressed the opinion that pupil involvement in planning 'resulted in less teacher control'; often required 'a high degree of adaptability of teachers'; and, in many cases, would require 'a lot more teacher training'. Some respondents thought that more experienced teachers might find it particularly difficult to accept the potential loss of control over what was to be taught.

Respondents also noted that this approach 'would work with some topics better than with others' and that 'it can be time-consuming'. A number of teachers found their classes took some time to 'get used to this new way of working' and that it 'was difficult to start pupil planning exercises in the upper school if it had never been done in previous classes'.

Some respondents agreed that 'the idea was good in theory, but that pupils (especially weaker or very young pupils or those with specific learning needs) needed a lot of teacher input'. One year 5 teacher's response was particularly negative: she thought that pupil involvement in planning was 'slightly contrived' and 'a pointless exercise'.

Pupil comments

To make sure that the 'pupil voice' was included in my research responses, four small group (5–6 pupils in each) interviews were carried out with pupils aged between 9 and 11 years in two Belfast primary schools. Pupils were asked to recall KWL grids they had created in recent months and previous years, and to explain what they thought they had learnt by using the grids. The pupils were able to recall some of the topics they had studied where a KWL exercise had been used. Among the geography-based topics they listed were 'Rainforests', 'Japan', 'Dynamic Earth' and 'Chinese New Year'. Many pupils were able to remember specific questions, which either they or others had asked and about which answers had been found.

These group interviews explored whether the pupils could explain why teachers thought that it was a good idea to use a KWL grid or involve pupils in planning topics in some other way. Many of the pupils gave insightful responses, including: 'it helps teachers to plan', 'teachers have a record of what we already know', 'teachers can see at the end of a topic how much we have learnt' and 'it summarises the topic'. One year 6 pupil said 'it helps keep children interested', and another added, 'yes – it helps keep you focused'. All of the pupils agreed that this kind of involvement was 'helpful for their interest and motivation', and one pupil commented that 'it had increased my confidence for future investigations'.

The chapter 'Children's voices', in the final report of the Cambridge Primary Review, encourages teachers to use pupil voice in their planning. The chapter attempts to reassure teachers who fear a loss on control: 'Suggesting that children should have a voice does not negate the importance of teacher voice' (Alexander, 2010, p. 154).

If pupil involvement in planning some elements of their learning is carried out with integrity and in a balanced, thoughtful way, it may prove a worthwhile, creative, motivating teaching technique. To help you try this approach in your school Figure 2 offers ideas for effective implementation, gleaned from the responses of the experienced and student teachers who took part in my research. A full checklist is available to download (see web panel).

References

Alexander, R. (ed) (2010) *Children, Their World, Their Education*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Shandomo, H. (2009) 'Getting to know you: cross-cultural penpals expand children's world view', *Childhood Education*, 85, 3, pp. 154–9.

United Nations (1989) *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. General Assembly Resolution 44/25, 20 November. Available at: www.un.org/documents/ga/res/44/a44r025.htm (last accessed 17/10/2018).

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- To stimulate pupil thinking, announce a couple of weeks in advance that the new topic will be beginning soon. Ask them to complete a KWL grid on the topic.
- Use pupils' responses to amend subsequent planning for the topic according to the knowledge/lack of knowledge displayed and to inform lines of enquiry.
- Use an initial stimulus – images, a video or a story – to activate prior knowledge.
- Especially for older pupils, lead some introductory, whole-class lessons on the topic, then allow the opportunity for individual or paired research by pupils on a specific aspect of it. This enables pupils to pursue their own questions and interests.
- Individual or small-group KWL grids can be created on paper before elements of them get transferred to a large, whole-class version.
- Especially for younger pupils, completing the W section may be more productive after a couple of lessons on the topic. This allows the pupils time to process new information and can improve their ability to generate questions.
- Where necessary, focus on the different types of questions that can be asked, including the '5 Ws and how' and what makes a good enquiry question.
- Act as scribe for younger or less able pupils who may be able to recall information or ask useful questions about a topic, but not have the writing skills to record their observations.
- If a large number of questions are generated, pupils can vote on which are the most important or popular questions.
- When a whole-class KWL grid has been created, pupils can be encouraged (as individuals, in groups or as a class) to categorise, rank and reorganise the K suggestions, then the W suggestions, under separate headings.

Figure 2: A checklist for good pupil voice activity planning.

💻 WEB RESOURCES

KWL checklist:
www.geography.org.uk/pg

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