Humanities and the arts: Pioneering shape in school, a human world focus

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Julia Black, Claire Gorrara, Lucy Jenkins, and Tallulah Holley [(1)], take a detailed look at the vital role of pioneering SHAPE in schools, that is, subjects that share a human world focus, like humanities and the arts

Climate change, shifting geopolitics, inequalities, the perils and opportunities of technological advances – we are facing a set of simultaneous crises which are more complex and dynamic than at any time in recent history.

As we try to address them, we are searching not only for solutions but also purpose and meaning. In that endeavour, social sciences, the humanities and the arts – the SHAPE subjects – have an essential role to play.

Humanities and the arts: SHAPE subjects and their importance

SHAPE subjects range from geography to graphic design, data analysis to drama, philosophy to poetry. They share a focus on the human world – on people and societies across time and space. Learning about SHAPE subjects can provide knowledge and skills to help us address many of the critical issues concerning people worldwide.

In itself, SHAPE is just a new acronym. But by offering this range of subjects a collective descriptor, we aim to demonstrate and celebrate their value.

We want to provide an easy description that ‘levels up’ their profile to be on a par with STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths/medicine).

Importantly, we are not pitting SHAPE and STEM in opposition. They each have a role and are frequent collaborators, with people who work in each, connecting knowledge and ideas for the benefit of us all. [(2)]

SHAPE in Schools resources

The SHAPE in Schools resources are part of a broader endeavour to inform and inspire students to study social sciences, humanities and the arts. They are designed for students aged 11-14 and have been piloted in 11 schools across the UK. [(3)]

They have three distinctive and innovative characteristics:

- An underpinning conceptual framework.
- The use of object-based learning.

- A set of activation projects with real-world applications.

Modes, methods and mindsets

The underlying design uses the concepts of ‘modes, methods, and mindsets’ as one way in which subjects like humanities and the arts can be approached.

Modes are the ‘building blocks’ of the learner resources. These are typically real-world examples that can be used as a starting point for deeper thinking about SHAPE.

This might be a direct source of information, such as a film, book, quiz, or an object, to provoke deeper thinking. In the pilot project, we used four objects: masks, trains, sugar and shoes.

Methods describe the ways of teaching or exploring SHAPE concepts. They include the methods used to create resources, methods to encourage learning, and methods that learners practice. They emphasise the interconnectedness of SHAPE subjects, capturing how the objects relate to different aspects of society and, more immediately, different parts of the curriculum.

Mindsets describe patterns of thinking and what influences them. By encouraging exploration of the same object from multiple disciplinary perspectives, the resources encourage both teachers and learners to consider their own perspectives and those of others.

Object-based learning

Object-based learning (OBL) involves using objects to prompt students to think about an object’s role in society and how it might have changed over time.

OBL is more often used in museums than in schools. Objects in familiar and unfamiliar forms provide a ‘disorientating experience’ to challenge learners’ preconceived ideas while creating a personal connection between the learner and the learning experience.

Activations and practical applications

Each resource set includes ‘activation’ tasks that prompt learners to create outputs linked to careers that use SHAPE skills. So, they might be asked to be an entrepreneur creating a business plan for a new brand of trainers or a game developer creating an app-based game to unveil a new train.

Each activity also requires students to think about the human dimension of their work – who will be using it and who they seek to influence, persuade, and entertain.

Why SHAPE in Schools is essential

SHAPE in Schools aims to make SHAPE subjects more visible in secondary schools. In the pilots, teachers responded very positively about the training experience and resources provided, particularly using OBL as an alternative to more traditional approaches.

For learners, many said the resources helped them see how different SHAPE subjects interlink and that they enjoyed exploring those connections, working collaboratively, and using their creativity. A number said they were more likely to take SHAPE subjects in later Key Stages due to the workshops.

SHAPE subjects (and their teachers) can feel they have been side-lined. Numbers taking SHAPE subjects such as modern languages and English are dropping across the UK. [4] Notwithstanding the denigration of SHAPE subjects by some in politics and the media, those studying them go on to earn as much as those in STEM. [5]

STEM and SHAPE are allies, and through demonstrating how to build connections, the SHAPE in Schools resources make this apparent.

Adopting the mindset of exploring and connecting different perspectives can help teachers to promote SHAPE subjects within their schools and classes.

There is scope to create a network between schools where teachers can inspire and educate one another and create new resources using the SHAPE in Schools resources as inspiration.

Ultimately it can help promote a balanced and interconnected curriculum, where no subjects within SHAPE and STEM are considered in isolation but rather as parts of the greater whole.

References

1. Julia Black is Professor and Strategic Director of Innovation at the LSE; Claire Gorrara is Professor and Dean of Research and Innovation at the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, Cardiff University; Lucy Jenkins is an Education Consultant and Project Director at the School of Modern Languages at Cardiff University; Tallulah Holley is an Education and Communications Consultant.
2. https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/connected-knowledge/
3. The resources were developed and piloted thanks to funding from the London School and Political Science's HEIF fund and are inspired by Dilly Fung's A Connected Curriculum for Higher Education (UCL Press, 2017) (though all errors remain our own).
4. BA SHAPE Observatory, https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/languages-provision-in-uk-further-education/
5. https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/english-studies-provision-uk-higher-education/

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