

Swan FM

Evaluating the Swan FM project

Year 11 GCSE Short Course Citizenship
Studies
Citizenship Activity 2005

Tower Hamlets Enterprise Learning
Pathfinder.

A Summary of the Project

The Swan FM project was designed to meet the coursework requirements of EDEXCEL GCSE Short Course Citizenship Studies (3280).

A full description of the coursework requirements for Citizenship Studies can be found in the examination specification at

<http://www.edexcel.org.uk/quals/gcse/citizenship/sc/3280>

Key Features of the Citizenship Activity;

- It is worth 40% of the total marks for the examination with the time spent on the project reflecting its importance in the assessment scheme
- It is designed to enable the students to 'participate in society', although the precise method how this aim is achieved is kept deliberately open to allow flexibility for centres working under different circumstances.
- It challenges students to record their 'own contribution' and the 'views, experiences and contribution' of others
- It involves four distinct stages of evidence recording: planning, an activity log, communication and evaluation.

Following experience of designing a Citizenship Activity in 2003-2004 I decided to apply other general principles to the planning of the project:

- The students were to have choice of the project they wished to work on as it would require a considerable commitment on their part if it were to succeed
- The planning of the project would reflect the working practice and professional roles of an associated business organisation
- The students would be allowed to make mistakes but would be encouraged to reflect on them and make improvements, as suggested in the guidelines for the activity.
- To encourage effective planning and evaluation multiple opportunities for reflection would be offered in the delivery of the project. Students would not be expected to write up and record every stage of the project to achieve a top GCSE mark.
- The project would use a low level of technology, be cheap to deliver and would require minimal technical expertise.
- I would draw on the support and knowledge of other Faculties and members of staff.

The task the students decided to plan and deliver, as their Citizenship Activity, was to organise and present a **Swanlea School Community Radio Station**. The context that I required them to work in was the format of a top 40 pop station presenting a mixture of music and news to meet the needs of the school community.

After my experience of the previous year I learnt that it would be difficult to plan the project following a standard Scheme of Work. Rather I would have to be prepared to plan lessons in response to decisions made by the students. I would especially have to review the progress being made by the group and plan input to help them plan, record and evaluate their progress to the standard required by the GCSE specification.

Therefore there is no regular Scheme of Work for the Swan FM project. Instead there is a set of resources that may be used to plan a radio station in a school context similar to Swanlea's. They are included with this review

Description of the Swan FM Project

The main aim of the Swan FM project was to fulfil the coursework requirements of GCSE Short Course Citizenship Studies.

In addition Swanlea's role as a Business and Enterprise College aims to provide students with opportunities to develop business and entrepreneurial skills across the curriculum.

Although the Swan FM project did not involve students in handling money and making profit orientated business decisions, it did involve;

- Risk
- Decision Making
- Problem Solving
- Modelling professional roles and practices
- Service to the community
- Negotiation with adult authority figures

For these reasons I applied for Pathfinder funding in September 2004, although at that time I had little idea of what the final costs of the project would be. I was awarded funding of £1000 to develop Swan FM.

I also had little idea of how a radio station actually worked and had to read up media studies textbooks and network with media professionals to develop a vision for Swan FM.

By the end of September 2004 I had decided on the overall structure of the project, although not its final delivery.

The Planning Stages I decided on were;

1. Research of radio broadcasts to record and plan the basic format of a pop/talk broadcast
2. Visit a radio station to find out how a show is planned and to practice technical skills
3. Use the result of the station visit to make a basic plan for Swan FM
4. Present the plan to Swanlea's leadership team in order to win permission to broadcast in school

5. Conduct audience research to ensure that Swan FM met the needs of the whole school audience
6. Plan an music and talk format based on the results of the audience survey
7. Allocate roles to students and ensure that the students had the opportunity to practice and develop different roles
8. Practice broadcasting on a Saturday morning
9. Select a week for Swan FM to broadcast
10. Evaluate the project.

The precise delivery of each stage involved my reflection on the progress being made by the students and especially the areas they found challenging and required extra support with.

Three points made progress with the project potentially challenging

- The low level of confidence of many of the students in making on-air presentations
- A reluctance to do detailed planning as highlighted by the comment that 'all you do in radio is chat on the mic'
- A reluctance to organise work based on the requests and needs of the wider school community – whether students with different tastes in music or the leadership team setting boundaries to the project.

It was here that I found that the influence of pirate radio stations operating outside usual legal or editorial controls have a significant influence on the listening habits of the students.

Overcoming these challenges was a major factor in the final success of the project, but it was hard work at times.

The project was delivered in the following ways.

Using Media Studies textbooks I designed a series of activities aiming to familiarise students with the forms and conventions of fm band broadcasts. The students recorded their responses to a number of stations as we listened to the radio in class. They began to identify their likes and dislikes and implicitly to plan what they would like Swanlea's radio station to sound like.

In September 2004 the class visited the Capital Radio studios in Leicester Square, London. Greg Edwards, a presenter on Capital Gold and a personal contact, made the visit possible. The production staff at Capital hosted the visit. Greg spoke to the students and led a workshop on voice presentation styles.

The visit was divided into three activities

1. A tour of the studios including the sports desk and the weather desk. The students briefly met Noel Gallagher of Oasis, waiting to be interviewed by Xfm, and saw Foxy in the studio presenting his show.

2. A demonstration of how a studio works and individual practice at delivering a link between records and a short news item as if 'live on air.' Greg Edwards sat in and advised on presentation styles and voice techniques.
3. An opportunity to script school news items of different lengths with one of the production staff.

The students greatly enjoyed the visit although they found live presentation difficult. They learned that, as a business, the Capital organisation comprises a number of different radio stations with diverse identities working together in the same building. For example in the studio next to the one used by Swanlea students for their practice broadcasts the Disney Channel was being broadcast.

They also learnt a key principle of radio station formatting which I decided to apply throughout the project.

In a non-specialist pop station the aim of the producers is to keep the audience listening until the advertisements are broadcast. Therefore audience members should not be alienated by the repeated playing of music styles they don't like but instead should be presented with a variety of styles making them feel that, if the current song is not to their taste, the next one or the one afterwards will be. As the producer said 'You never play the same type of song twice in a row. People just switch off.' In the context of Capital Gold this refers to variety in songs from the 60s, 70s, 80s and 90s as well as different styles.

The songs are not selected by the presenter, but in advance by the producer. The producer uses a pie chart to record the different songs and variety of styles to be played in a 60-minute period.

This was a planning principle which some of the group, who had very specific music tastes they wished to share with the rest of the school, took a long time to accept.

We also learnt that it is challenging to script even a 10 second news item and that presenters have a sheet recording the details of each song to help them plan their spoken presentations. This records the length of the song, the length of the musical introduction before the vocals begin and whether the song fades or ends abruptly.

On returning to class the students were excited by the visit and I had in my mind a clearer vision of how we could model Swanlea's station on the presentation style of Capital Gold.

Looking back over the project it would be difficult to inspire students and plan a school radio station without organising a visit to a local professional station.

I then divided the class into groups and asked them to work on basic planning tasks related to the station. This involved designing a name for the station and

a basic idea of the broadcast times and station format. Mr Goodman, pastoral deputy head, came to the class and gave a talk on what the school, as a community would expect from the station and what the boundaries were. The class were asked, in their groups, to plan a presentation to the leadership team outlining how they would meet Mr Goodman's and the school's expectations. The plan was that the group presentation would lead to the formal 'go ahead' from the school to deliver broadcasts.

The class quickly decided on the name Swan FM for their station and evaluated the suitability of a number of alternative suggestions. Swan FM met three requirements Greg Edwards had explained to us; it is short, memorable and it reflects the community it serves. However he was less sure about a station being named after an animal, even one as graceful as a swan!

The students sketched possible logos and selected an overall design. I had intended to ask the art department to design a professional logo but pressure of time led me to design a logo with the kissing swans being copied from clipart. The students accepted and liked the design.

I recorded Mr Goodman's key points and based some materials on asking the students to consider how to meet them.

Mr Goodman returned to the class to hear a practice of the presentation while I taught his lesson. His feelings were that some of the students reached a high level of presentation while others had barely made an effort.

This is an issue with working on an activity such as this with a mixed ability class and doing it as a coursework requirement. There were several disaffected students in the class who constantly let their colleagues down and had a minimal input. Swan FM was 'carried' by a core of motivated students and projects such as this may work better as voluntary extra-curricular activities.

Mr Goodman felt that it would not be appropriate for the whole group to present to the leadership team as planned and that he would allow the project to proceed on the basis of what he had heard.

In the meantime I had been discussing the technical specifications of the project with Ray Lau, the head of music.

The music department had already bought vinyl and CD DJ decks, a basic mixing board and microphones. The music practice room could be used as a studio. I had discounted ambitious plans to set up an induction loop or a similar technical network to broadcast the programming. Using the tannoy system was out of the question, as it would contravene health and safety regulations. However the amplifier in reception linked to the 4 stereo speakers mounted on the wall of the mall offered a suitable method of broadcasting. Using this system would require running a long 'jack' cable from the music practice room to reception. Although the cable is cheap, its safe and secure installation presented challenges.

Finally I decided to ask if the old reception area could be used as the studio and the office staff kindly agreed. This removed the need to run a cable from another area of the school but presented the difficulty of having Swan FM presenters working on their shows in sight of their peers in the mall.

After school one day a group of students and I made a practice broadcast using the equipment and methods I had finally decided to use. We found that the speakers in the mall were hard-mounted to the wall and this led to sound distortion. The speakers should have been mounted on brackets in the first instance and this is a change the school may wish to consider if it wishes to make effective use of the speakers in the future. We had insufficient time to make any changes and would just have to be careful with setting the tone and volume controls on the amplifier to avoid distortion.

While working on the technical specifications I also demonstrated how to use a studio monitor and headphones to avoid feedback and the class practiced setting acceptable sound tolerance levels.

The lessons I learned from the technical planning were;

- To keep the technical specifications as simple as possible
- To give careful consideration to the location of the studio and how its location will relate to the method of broadcasting. My original plan to use the Music Studio was impractical.
- To assume that 'nothing will work' and begin planning from that assumption.

The next stage of the process was to plan the programme structure and music policy of Swan FM. I wished to model Swan FM on Capital Gold as closely as possible.

To do this the group planned and I designed an audience survey to be completed by a sample of students from each tutor group. We would then use the survey to design 'pie charts' of different music styles suggested by the school community and finally to buy and schedule individual songs reflecting the different styles enjoyed by Swanlea students. The audience survey also asked about spoken word programming, and I decided this would form the second part of our programme planning.

Despite repeated announcements in staff briefing and letters in registers only 20% of tutors asked their classes to complete and returned Swan FM audience surveys. This was a disappointing response, but the students agreed to base their programming on the results of the survey they had received, which they calculated were roughly representative of the age and gender mix of the school.

The overall results of the audience survey were

- A broad request for extensive programming of Islamic music (20% of the total)
- R+B and Hip Hop as the most frequently requested styles
- Significant minority interests – eg: pop, dance, rock, banghra
- Few specific spoken word requests

The class decided that they would play Islamic music on Friday to reflect the school's interest and would 'pie chart' the other styles to fit the remaining programme slots between Monday and Thursday.

We then downloaded the top 40 charts from a variety of sources and began to identify specific songs that we could buy to schedule in our programming. Several students were unsure about how to match specific song titles to styles but a core of knowledgeable students provided guidance. I found that I had significantly more knowledge of current pop than many of the students, which surprised me.

Finally a group of 4 students and I visited the HMV Shop and bought the Swan FM playlist with our Pathfinder funding. The cost was around £150. I then accompanied 2 students to an Islamic bookshop and bought 2 CDs of nasheeds selected by the students.

Once we had the CD singles back in school the students designed their own 20 minute playlists using the pie chart principle.

I then allocated professional roles to the students

- Presenter
- Producer
- Technician

Each role had a job description and an evaluation sheet. There were to be 3 shows each day; a 'Rise and Shine' breakfast show between 8.15 and 8.35 and two shows each lunchtime between 12.45 – 1.05 and 1.05 – 1.25. The aim of the Breakfast Show was to encourage punctuality by having a fun broadcast in progress as students arrived in school. However this 'graveyard slot' was unpopular with most of the Swan FM teams.

I asked for Swan FM news items at staff briefings and via leadership team but received little feedback. Finally I asked students to research specific items such as the weather forecast and the menu in the restaurant.

Swan FM week. 7- 11 March 2005.

The following is a summary of Swan FM week

1. All the student groups except one turned up on time to present their shows

2. The format of the shows was followed generally but not always specifically as planned. This was due mainly to time pressure rather than any strong desire to divert from the schedule
3. The students felt a real sense of achievement and wanted to continue the project
4. The most challenging aspect of broadcasting was the Swan FM news items, which were ignored by a number of presenters who wanted to minimize the time their voice was on air and just play music
5. With the exception of Monday, when the new activity attracted a lot of curiosity, Swan FM's studio was largely ignored. However students trying to enter the reception area did annoy the office staff on several occasions
6. The audience appeared to enjoy the programming and the idea of a school radio station, although no formal evaluation was carried out.
7. The quality of the shows varied, with several reaching a high professional standard.

However there was one unforeseen issue that changed the structure and tone of the week.

On Monday two students came to see me and said that the Swan FM broadcast could be heard in the assembly hall where Muslim prayers were being conducted. I went upstairs, could clearly hear the music and went downstairs, turned the amplifier down and told the presenters to keep the volume at that level after prayers started for the rest of the week. As Muslims the group was shocked that they hadn't thought of this problem before.

The next day I tested the volume by going into the assembly hall and checking I couldn't hear music. I confirmed this with the teacher present who told me there was no longer a problem.

Meanwhile a group of students asked if they could broadcast the call to prayer on Swan FM every day from Tuesday. Given the high response requesting Islamic music in the audience survey and the mature and reasonable way in which the request was made I agreed. Given the community remit of the station I did not foresee a problem and allowed the students to keep broad editorial control.

The call to prayer was made on Tuesday. On Wednesday I was verbally criticised by a member of staff for allowing it to be made. This surprised me and I explained my reasons. I didn't believe it was a serious enough editorial decision to be taken out of the hands of the students. Before the call to prayer was made on Wednesday the leadership team told the students it was not allowed without a clear reason being given at the time. Afterwards it was explained to the students that the sound of the call was audible outside the school building and that this created a misleading impression in the community of what the purpose of Swanlea as a secular school is. I totally accepted this, although the students were quite angry and lengthy discussions were required to encourage them to see the bigger picture.

Finally a group of students went to the leadership team and requested that Swan FM stop broadcasting at 1.05 every afternoon due to their view that it was inappropriate that any pop music was being played in school at a time of prayer. I was told to stop Swan FM broadcasting at 1.05 for every remaining days.

The playing of nasheeds on Friday proceeded without any controversy.

This left me with a sour taste in my mouth and I felt confused by the decisions made by the leadership team as the week unfolded and the level of support being given to a project such as Swan FM by the wider school community. It taught me that the precise role of the project in relation to the school's aims and expectations has to be precisely negotiated with the leadership team of the school. The discussions I had during the planning process had not identified these areas as concerns and I had not seriously considered them.

Summary

Key Points (some serious, some not so serious)

- Keep the technology as simple as possible
- Keep it cheap: spending £1000 on 25 students would not, in my opinion, have been best use of the money.
- Plan in as many stages as possible for group planning and evaluation.
- Encourage group work as a core element of the activity.
- Prepare for things to go wrong
- Think out of the box and plan from lesson to lesson
- Base the project on a visit to a local radio station – make it real
- Get the support of the leadership team and the wider school community – keep everyone informed
- Be prepared not to get the support you expect
- Work with anyone who shows a flicker of interest
- Remain passionate with the students – keep faith in their abilities to deliver even when it looks hopeless
- Have fun – yes I did enjoy it
- Take the opportunity to do your own show – if you're Mr McLaverty call it the 'Mac Attack' and make sure you inflict your taste in Brazilian Hip Hop on the school community.
- Learning like this can change the curriculum.

One student's assignment was 38 sides of original word-processed work, one wrote one side. Most achieved 1,500 words or more.

Thanks to

The Year 11 Citizenship Studies Group

Andrew Goodman – Deputy Head, Swanlea School

Ray Lau – Head of Music, Swanlea School

Simon Firth – Head of BICTE, Swanlea School

Greg Edwards and all who helped at Capital Gold

Nick Embrey – PGCE Student, Goldsmiths College

Rosie and the office staff, Swanlea School

Everyone else who even the smallest thing to help

John McLaverty

Head of Humanities, Swanlea School