School Journeys Creative Partnerships London East

Introduction and Summary

David Parker

Introduction

Education, once again, is going through a time of widespread reflection and adaptation. Some clear issues emerge at the heart of these changes and one is the nature of the relationship between creativity and learning. How can flexible and adaptive approaches by educators be made to work consistently as a means of improving attainment? How can the necessary links be made between schools and the cultural sector in order to enable this change? And, in the longer-term, how can we ensure these new approaches to learning retain the ability to reshape the curriculum where necessary and thereby meet the needs of employers in rapidly developing knowledge economies?

These are big questions and it is not within the scope of these case studies to reach any definitive conclusions. Yet, in reading them, one is struck time and again by useful suggestions and implications for long-term transformation. Environmental adaptations to the school that foster more positive learning conditions, such as the Outdoor Learning project at Grafton Primary School in Islington, create a legacy for staff and pupils which moves beyond testing and measurement. However, projects such as the innovative exploration of Henry VIII and the Reformation at Bow School in Tower Hamlets, incorporating digital media technologies, have clear links to the curriculum and greatly enhanced the teaching and learning experience for all involved. The inspiring documentary Beneath the Hood, a collaboration over a full academic year between filmmaker Eelyn Lee and students from Daniel House Pupil Referral Unit in Hackney, is a case study in the motivating power of new media and its ability to engage young people with a range of learning styles.

All of this work has been completed under the auspices of the Creative Partnerships initiative, a change programme funded jointly by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for Education and Skills. London East is one of 36 areas across England, forming part of this ambitious national programme exploring the transformational potential of creative learning. There is a strong focus on working with schools in areas of deprivation. Accordingly, the participants described in these case studies present some of the most pressing challenges to be found in contemporary education. Large proportions of the students have English as an additional language and/or have been identified with a range of special educational needs. What Creative Partnerships London East shows through these case studies is that challenges in such schools need not be founded upon a deficit model of learning. Young people have a wealth of creative potential, regardless of their scores in attainment tests, and when this is tapped there are many benefits to be had. Some of these benefits are described on this CD Rom.

The projects outlined here have clearly made an impact on everyone that took part, staff and students alike. There is evidence of a general sense of positivity and energy that flows from this kind of work and which can spread virally across whole schools, sometimes across whole education authorities. Cutting across the overall sense of impact are a number of clearly identifiable themes, each one emerging in different London East schools over various timescales, yet nonetheless common to all Creative Partnerships work. This is encouraging since it implies a set of key principles that hold true for the Creative Partnerships approach, regardless of which artists or creative professionals are involved. What appears to be key here is the combinations of the medium and processes that they use. In the summary and conclusions section I will attempt to draw these themes together and to show how they offer insights into a range of important potential shifts in the education and cultural sectors at this time.

At policy level there are shifts that would seem to embrace the concept of creative learning. The development of Personalised Learning, for example, is a way in which schools can tailor education to ensure that every student achieves the highest standard possible. One element of this is to ensure we develop the competence and confidence of each learner through teaching and learning strategies that build on individual needs. This requires strategies that actively engage and stretch all students; that creatively deploy teachers, support staff and new technologies to extend learning opportunities; and that accommodate different paces and styles of learning. From the evidence of these case studies Creative Partnerships does all this and more. It recognises that the multiple intelligences of pupils require a repertoire of teaching strategies. It is also about students acquiring the skills to fulfil their own potential, by ensuring they have the capability and accept the responsibility to take forward their own learning.

ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

Creative Partnerships

Summary

General observations about these case studies bear out much that has already been written about creativity and learning. We know that it is not enough to focus on the fostering of individual creativity, that without proper attention to whole school change – i.e., organisational change – creative abilities will not be valued and mobilised in the ways that they should. We know that innovation often happens with the greatest force and deepest impact when existing knowledge is combined with new means of making and expressing. And we know, but need to know more, about the intensely important role that feelings and 'affective behaviours' have in the development of good teaching and learning. Yet there are sets of sub-issues to all these and in summarising the case studies it is worth listing a number of issues that crop up repeatedly.

- Sustainability
- Learning styles
- Staff development
- Impact on self-esteem and attainment
- Challenges in partnership work

Sustainability

How do we ensure that the best of the work described here can continue beyond the life of Creative Partnerships? I would argue that there are two aspects we need to consider in answering this question. On one hand we need to create the conditions by which schools are able to use creative approaches to learning across the curriculum, and that means future planning and funding for the strategic use of creative professionals within classrooms. This would build on the work described here and would give us grounds to explore over a longer period of time the possibility of strong links between this way of learning and dramatically improved attainment. On the other hand we need to bear in mind that what counts as attainment currently is based upon what Cropley (2004) might call 'convergent thinking', and so in looking to sustain creativity in schools we must admit the possibility that education as it has been conceived for centuries is not the best mechanism for inculcating the kind of divergent thinking described in these case studies. Many learners, even in schools where Creative Partnerships has flourished will have abilities and skills that have not been recognised or valued because they have not been required.

Learning styles

Implicit throughout these pages have been a number of approaches to teaching and learning which incorporate a range of techniques or 'ways in' to thinking creatively. For example, making links and associations between disparate and wide-ranging pieces of information, the recoding of the possibilities for products and forms in new and unusual ways and the use of intuition as a way of exploring more openly the opportunities and limits of learning tasks. Both the animation project splash@columbia at Columbia Primary School, Tower Hamlets and Talk 2 Text at Lauriston School, Hackney, accentuate the importance of a multiplicity of forms and approaches for reflecting back learning. It may be a single concept a teacher is hoping to convey – in the examples above, the importance and creative possibilities of narrative form – but by offering access to varied modes and media young people can effectively choose how best to adopt new information and then offer it back in the form of learned skills and owned knowledge. Another feature of the projects is that they offer an autonomy to learning that may help to develop students' problem-solving and decision-making skills. Morgan (1983) has suggested that there may be two key features to what he identified as 'independent learning' and they were: the pupil's own responsibility for offering input for the design of their own learning and the active involvement by pupils in finding solutions to real-life problems. In the case of Creative Partnerships this idea is modified somewhat; problems become opportunities, solutions become choices and the end product provides a means of expressing both through media that offer an array of visual, auditory and kinaesthetic experiences.

Staff development

School staff and creative professionals, of course, are key to creative learning. Where the projects have worked best the planning of activities and the identification of learning outcomes has been a shared endeavour. The senior management team in schools with the most effective projects have been strongly committed to new ways of working, risk-taking and developing different values to acknowledge a variety of modes of intelligence. All of which creates the conditions necessary for staff development and this links back to the issue of sustainability. Teachers are looking to develop ways of offering dramatic and memorable learning experiences that can be effective deliverers of improved attainment, but also increase student's abilities to think divergently or laterally.

In this regard they are no different to the students themselves who, in these case studies, display a real thirst for educational experiences that fully involve them. However, there is no doubt that shifting position as they attempt to foster creativity presents teachers and creative professionals with a number of challenges, not least of which is the high degree of uncertainty that often accompanies the very best creative work. The problem here is that public and, to an extent, professional tolerance to risk is fairly low and so fostering an enabling ethos within schools is essential to counteract this. Developing this kind of atmosphere in a school takes time and commitment, but where it does become embedded the gains can be exponential – see the Islington Arts and Media School case study for an example of this.

Impact on self-esteem and attainment

It is unfair to expect short case studies such as these to probe in depth the quality of learning for all young people involved, but it is interesting that where impacts are described there is a tendency to focus on the development of self-esteem. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the bold transformations to the physical environment that these projects have created, and the engaging learning processes this implies. But it is worth remembering that creative learning and improved attainment in terms of test scores or teacher moderated class work are not mutually exclusive. A number of empirical studies have demonstrated that a connection may well exist between creativity and improved grades (Ai, 1999; Plucker, 1999). While I would not promote the use of creativity in schools solely for the advancement of attainment within current definitions of what counts as knowledge and learning, i.e. the National Curriculum, it would do us no harm to highlight such connections where they exist. Large increases in positive self-image and the establishment of a renewed engagement with school as a meaningful place to learn and communicate for young people is worthy of further exploration. Not to corroborate these perceptions per se, but rather to dig deeper and to discover whether such attitudinal changes might lead over a longer period to boosted performance in standard tests. Additionally, we need to explore what skills and knowledge might be being developed and which could be highly valued, but that do not currently get the acknowledgement they deserve through our existing models of assessment.

Challenges in partnership working

Central to the Creative Partnerships approach is the notion of long-term collaboration. Teachers and creative professionals each bring sets of expertise to the initiative and it is through an iterative process of exchange and development that both parties come to understand their role in facilitating rich creative learning experiences. This takes joint planning and often a longer lead-in to projects than schools would expect. Where such planning is fostered the degree of satisfaction among learners, teachers and creatives is high. The Central Foundation Girls' School and Bow Arts Trust case study offers a good example of this. The possibility of artists somehow undermining the teacher's role was addressed in INSET sessions and a long-term vision for joint planning and collaborative teaching has been established. Where planning has been most effective the resulting project has felt to all participants like the beginning of an on-going process rather than the culmination of a one-off experience. It should be noted that planning has not always gone well and there are some honest and frank examples here of projects which have not succeeded as well as they might have done. It is difficult to tell whether this is a systemic problem for the schools and creatives involved, or merely a staging post on the way to fuller engagement and more effective planning. If we recognise that the willingness to take risks and to fail is at the core of ongoing creative learning then we must explore the latter possibility thoroughly.

Conclusions

What is most striking about these case studies is the extent to which they expose learning as an enterprise that is people- rather than systems-led. This may be something we all intuit for ourselves but it is good to see it reinforced here. It is also true that these studies underscore the fundamental importance of collaboration and the fusing or inter-connection of areas of expertise. Contacts between creative professionals, artists and schools are the sparks that create the projects described here. In many cases what we are seeing is the first rush of enthusiasm for the new possibilities that seem to exist. Once these have been explored it is clearly vital that the conditions for long-term collaboration are remade over and over again. This will require the consistent testing of boundaries and disciplines, the questioning of what counts as valuable 'content' in learning environments and the desire to work outside traditional departmental structures.

The introduction to these case studies emphasised the current climate of change within education and to conclude it is worth returning to that theme. Change within relatively small communities – such as the connected family of Creative Partnerships areas across England – is challenging enough. It is even more difficult to convince policy-makers that creative learning, which might involve risk-taking or questioning current beliefs and practices, is beneficial to society in the broadest sense. The aggregation of learning from case studies such as these and other research and evaluation taking place at this time is crucial if we are to make a clear case for the value of this work. I feel that the perceptions of teachers, creative professionals and pupils evidenced through these case studies add something very positive to the overall impact we are beginning to describe. And if creativity, as we all believe, is a thread that pulls together the individual, society, education and the economy then Creative Partnerships, through the narratives presented here, continues to be instrumental in ensuring the right kinds of connection are maintained.

David Parker
Director of Research,
Creative Partnerships

References

Cropley, A.J. (2004) *Creativity in Education and Learning*, Routledge, London

Ai, X. (1999) *Creativity and Academic Achievement: an investigation of gender differences*, Creativity Research Journal, 12, pp329-38

Morgan, A. (1983) *Theoretical aspects of project-based learning in higher education*, British Journal of Educational Technology, 5, pp385-418

Plucker, J.A. (1999) *Is the proof in the pudding?* Reanalysis of Torrance's longitudinal data, Creativity Research Journal, 12, pp103-14