

CASE STUDY

Co-Construction of Learning
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Foreword

Creative Partnerships began in 2002, as a way of bringing together schools and practitioners from a wide range of creative backgrounds to collaborate on innovative projects for children and young people.

As the delivery agency for Creative Partnerships in London, A New Direction has seen thousands of young Londoners develop their creative skills, and engage in their learning in new and exciting ways through taking part in the programme.

As Creative Partnerships comes to a close, and A New Direction gears up to take on a new and strategic role for children and young people and the arts in London, we present this set of Case Studies to celebrate the programme, exploring the themes of: creativity and change (looking at whole-school change), co-construction of learning, staff development and learning, creative teaching and learning, and outcomes for the 21st century (looking at outcomes for young people).

A New Direction would like to thank all of the students, teachers, school staff, practitioners, and Creative Agents who have given so much to the programme.

Congratulations on all you have achieved.

Steve Moffitt, Director

Introduction

'Co-construction' is a term that has been used by Creative Partnerships for some years but is less commonly used within schools. It is tempting to replace co-construction with a more familiar term such as 'student voice' but whilst related, these terms are not interchangeable. In one of a series of discussion papers on personalised learning,¹ David Hargreaves describes co-construction as 'the readiness to treat students as active partners in the design, implementation and evaluation of their education.' The emphasis in Creative Partnerships has been on young people's co-construction of learning with teachers and creative practitioners but Hargreaves suggests a broader agenda where, 'the student would thus have the readiness and ability to co-construct with others all aspects of education – teaching, learning, curriculum and assessment, indeed everything that makes up the experience of schooling.'

This case study considers how three schools have explored and promoted co-construction. The schools have contrasting student populations, varied organisational cultures and differing starting points but each has taken significant steps to embrace co-construction. The study is based on observation and conversations undertaken with students, senior leaders and Creative Partnerships Coordinators in spring 2011. Additional evidence is drawn from project documentation completed by the schools' Coordinators and Creative Agents.² The study focuses on projects undertaken in the final year of the programme.

All three schools undertook an Enquiry School project³ with Creative Partnerships in 2007/08 prior to becoming a Change School⁴ from 2008-11.

3 schools x 3 years

Beormund Primary School, Southwark

Beormund Primary is a special school for pupils with severe social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. Pupils often have complex needs including speech and language difficulties and autism. Each has a statement of special educational needs. Ofsted rated the school as satisfactory in 2010.

Staff at Beormund felt the first year's project did not have the impact they had hoped for. Although children were engaged, there were limited opportunities for them to shape the work or develop new skills. The school's Coordinator proposed that in future years, school representatives (including children) should have the opportunity to observe creative practitioners' work before a final selection of partner was made. In years two and three of the programme, this is what happened.

In the second year, the school chose to work with Emergency Exit Arts on a cross-arts project exploring 'Superheroes'. The project highlighted that the pupils had an aptitude for practical, creative work where they could access and articulate their ideas.

Building on the success of Superheroes, the school was keen to find ways of enabling pupils to see links between their strengths in school and further education or careers. With a focus on applied practice, the project aimed for pupils and creative practitioners to work together to turn a resources room into a library.

Enquiry 2010/11: How can we use creative practice to enable our students to make links to further education and understand creative career paths?

Two organisations ran taster sessions in the autumn term 2010. The Creative Agent commented, '[The Coordinator] was very good at priming the children in terms of their role in selecting the partners and talked about the idea of a job interview.' The Facility Architects were selected and three practitioners introduced a range of practices including textiles, lighting, sculpture, design and construction.

After an initial Inset for all staff,⁵ the project ran for a day a week throughout the spring term 2011 and the practitioners worked with small groups of four or five Year 6 students at a time. Each week, students were given a badge for the 'job' they were exploring: architect, engineer, installation designer etc. The outputs were diverse, including maquettes of the new library, hand casts, lighting boxes and cushions.

A second partnership was formed with the PGCE Design & Technology (DT) course at Goldsmiths, University of London. The University hosted a visit for Beormund pupils and Goldsmiths' DT students constructed a 'learning pod' for the new school library, following a design developed by Beormund pupils supported by the architects.



Convent of Jesus and Mary Language College, Brent

The Convent of Jesus and Mary Language College (CJM) is an average sized girls' Catholic comprehensive which draws students from a wide area of north-west London. The school is a diverse community with around three quarters of the students coming from minority ethnic groups. In 2009, Ofsted rated the school as outstanding (an improvement from 'good' in 2006) but drew attention to the need to make teaching more interactive and with more opportunities for independent or collaborative work.

Two development priorities at the school informed the three-year Change School programme (and also the initial Enquiry year). First, the need to increase the number of outstanding lessons through greater creativity in teaching and second, to increase student voice within the school. The training organisation Bridgebuilders, worked with the school each year.

The first year focussed on developing the structure and effectiveness of the student council alongside action learning and coaching to develop shared understanding of creativity amongst teachers, senior leaders and students. In the second year, the student council developed a project to facilitate student co-construction of the curriculum (an area of need highlighted by the student council during the first year). Students identified '9 Essential Elements to make Learning Fun and Interesting'⁶ which were shared with staff. Students took on the role of lesson observers, providing feedback to teachers on meeting the 9 Essential Elements.

Enquiry 2010/11: How can we expand and embed making learning fun and interesting across the whole school both now and in the future?

The third year comprised two interrelated strands:

Practitioners continued work with the student council with the aim of it becoming a 'self-sustaining influential force within the school with the confidence and expertise to establish dialogue with the wider student body'.⁷ Initial sessions focussed on working practices but the students were keen to work towards an event that exemplified their aim of increasing student/teacher interaction; students decided to coordinate a 'Dragon's Den' activity for Year 9 students.

The second strand focussed on developing a group of student 'Lead Learners' and supporting their dialogue with teachers during departmental reviews of teaching and learning. Each department selected a small group of Lead Learners and following a focus group, identified an action plan with four targets, two of which were suggested by the students. Practitioners worked closely with the Assistant Headteacher with responsibility for Student Leadership on this strand and continued to support students as they worked with departmental staff on their action points.



Surrey Square Primary School, Southwark

Surrey Square Primary School was officially formed in January 2011⁸ when the Infant and Junior schools (of the same name and housed in the same building) merged. The majority of pupils speak English as an additional language and the proportion with special educational needs is high. Prior to merger, Ofsted judged the Infant School as good; the Junior School was rated as outstanding in 2009 and Ofsted quoted a governor who said, 'The model for improving the school is built up around pupils' needs: the pupils are not expected to fit a model.'

The Infant School was part of the Change Schools programme from 2008. The first year's project focussed on film-making. The aim was to provide children with a new medium through which to present their work. The project in the second year focussed on improving the outdoor curriculum in the Nursery. Children's ideas were explored through a variety of media and provided staff with practicable solutions that have been put into practice.

As the Infant and Junior schools began to work together (from April 2010), the Headteacher was keen to develop a shared understanding of good teaching and its relationship to creativity. The Creative Partnerships project in the third year therefore, supported the merger process by providing space and mechanisms for the school community to investigate creativity. Two practitioners from Bridgebuilders worked on all aspects of the project.

The project activity commenced in January 2011 with a full staff Inset day exploring creativity. Professional development for staff continued through action learning sets which provided opportunities for staff to share ideas and outcomes

Enquiry 2010/11: What does creativity mean for us at Surrey Square Primary School - for each of us as individuals, in our different groups and for us as a whole school?

of trialling new ways of working. Alongside developments with staff, the creative practitioners began work with a group of children called the 'Creative Ambassadors' (two children from each of the eight classes in Key Stage 2).

Following a similar path to the staff, the children explored the meanings and benefits of creativity. They identified five elements of creativity:

- Imagining
- Resilience
- Collaborating
- Listening and noticing
- Experimenting and taking risks

The Creative Ambassadors planned a day of 'Creative Olympics' where groups of pupils and staff were challenged through creative games (such as creating a story from five objects) and were judged by the Ambassadors against each of the five elements.

Following the Olympics, the Ambassadors met one teacher from each phase group to give them feedback about what they felt could be improved in relation to creative teaching and learning. Together, children and teachers also discussed how to embed the legacy of the project at Surrey Square.



Why Co-construction?

During case study visits, school staff and students were asked about the value of co-construction.

Typical responses included:

‘Personalisation; ownership; engagement; sense of purpose; making choices and being independent.’
(Coordinator, Beormund)

‘We come to school and it’s a joy! Mostly for children, school is a chore. But by having a say, we are happier and it’s fairer.’
(Key Stage 2 pupil, Surrey Square)

‘Children need to have a say because it’s our learning and our education. You have to tell teachers if you’re not learning.’
(Key Stage 2 pupil, Surrey Square)

Senior leaders emphasised the need for teachers to have confidence in the approach (and in the students). As the Coordinator at Surrey Square explained,

‘Sometimes it can look like things are going wrong but somewhere in that apparent chaos, there will be a light bulb moment, something you can learn from, about your practice or about a child. You have to be open to it, take a step back, not interfere.’



Outcomes

The outcomes for staff, students and creative practitioners were many and diverse. For the purposes of this case study however, the focus is on outcomes linked to co-construction. These have been grouped and evidence highlighted; the majority of categories describe the necessary conditions for co-construction as well as the outcomes from it.

Listening

'[The practitioners] are good listeners - if you have an idea, they will let you use it.'
(Student, Surrey Square)

'I am now getting to hear what the children are saying and they are understanding things at a different level, because they are learning through practical activities.'
(Teacher, Surrey Square)

The need for structure/scaffolding learning

'The [creative practitioners] have given the girls the necessary guidance and structure in order for them to work co-constructively with each other and with staff. They have developed their understanding of cooperation and team work and can now listen to each other, share ideas and build on each other's ideas in order to improve them.'
(Coordinator, CJM)

Improving relationships and trust

Hargreaves (2006) argues for trust as a precursor for co-construction, 'In deep learning, students articulate their needs, problems and preferences in an invited conversation with the teacher; this arises only under conditions of trust between the parties.' Evidence from the schools indicates success in this regard.

'We have better relationships with teachers now because there is more opportunity to discuss what works and what doesn't and share ideas on how things could be done better... I think the teachers are developing more trust in us and our ideas.'
(Student CJM)

'The meeting yesterday, it just showed how far we have moved on from where we were. The dialogue we had; the respect that teachers had for the children and their ideas on how to move forward.'
(Coordinator, Surrey Square)

Pace, ownership and engagement

Towards the end of the project at Beormund, the Coordinator was concerned that the pupils might be excluded from the final stage of installing and mounting their work. The practitioners slowed down and simplified the installation process so that pupils could work alongside them preparing the space and mounting the work. In the final evaluation, the Coordinator commented on the importance of this approach,

'This gave the children complete ownership over the process and will make a big difference to how they view the space. It's good that the children have worked alongside the architects at every stage... They have been central to every decision and this has guaranteed their input and energy into the project.'

Reflecting students' lives

In terms of Beormund's project's aim of building links between school and career paths, the experience of painting the new library struck a chord with one student whose step-father is a decorator, 'I could go out working with Pat now and help him paint and decorate' he commented. The Coordinator added,
'We have children now saying they want to be an

architect when four months ago they weren't sure what the word meant. This doesn't mean that they will go on to be architects but it could be a key moment in their education where they can see they have practical skills and talents that could lead them into a profession.'

Confidence and independence

'It was great that staff threw themselves into it so the pupils could see that you didn't need prior experience to be able to achieve a good result. This gave the pupils more confidence in themselves to see someone they know doing the same work rather than an external professional leading the way the whole time.'

(Creative Practitioner, Beormund)

Thinking skills

Research into student consultation has found, 'Giving young learners opportunities to think and talk about aspects of teaching and learning can have a direct impact on pupils' metacognitive development and on their understanding of how they learn'.⁹

All the projects involved students planning, executing and evaluating activities. Creative practitioners and staff encouraged ongoing reflection, thus improving metacognition. Once developed, these higher order thinking skills can be applied to new situations. The Coordinator at CJM, for example, reported,

'I went to the department meeting with the Lead Learners. Students were reflecting on times when teachers had tried new things. I was struck by how good the students vocabulary is now - for talking about learning.

At Beormund, the process of selecting the creative practitioners gave the students ownership of the

project. It also gave them an opportunity to think about teaching and learning. During the case study focus group, students reflected on why they had chosen The Facility Architects.

'They were the ideal people.'

'They did more stuff.... like, taking more stuff into action.'

'We had a vote... with bits of paper - like the school council.'

Later, the Coordinator commented on the students perceptiveness during this conversation. She was also pleased that they linked the selection process to that of the student council.

Taking risks

'The biggest risk has been doing a learning review in a very different way; we don't usually invite pupils to take part and discuss the learning. The action points, as a result, were two from teachers and two from students, so that is quite a risk.'

(Coordinator, CJM)

'I was nervous because I didn't know if we could tell the Head about the stuff we wanted but we did and she listened.'

(Year 7 student, CJM)

Embedding outcomes

Professional development for staff has been a key element in plans to embed co-construction in all three schools. Additional outcomes and strategies will also support sustainability. Examples include:

- Surrey Square has six Core Values. The Creative Ambassadors in discussion with teachers decided that creativity should become a seventh value. The children realised that an acrostic of their five elements (together with the word creativity) spelt CIRCLE and the school has therefore determined to develop a creativity wheel (designed by children) which will be displayed in each classroom. The Coordinator explained the significance of the move,

'As one of the Core Values, creativity will be integrated into the language of the school. We give out certificates to children for each Core Value; there will be a sticker for creativity... we give them to children who display our values.'

- At CJM, there was continuity of Coordinator throughout the three years of the Change Schools Programme. The final year introduced distributed leadership with a second Assistant Head taking responsibility for the Lead Learners and active engagement from the school's Advanced Skills Teachers.



Conclusion

These projects have demonstrated the benefits of co-construction of learning for pupils in terms of increased engagement, a stronger sense of agency, increased independence and maturity, enhanced thinking skills and improved relationships. For teachers it offers new insights to students' capabilities and their own teaching practices, and opportunities for joint learning, reflection and assessment. These projects have also highlighted how co-construction can be applied to all aspects of schools including:

- Teaching reviews through Lesson Observers and Lead Learners
- Curriculum development ensuring relevance to students' interests and lives
- Inclusivity through student voice e.g. Student Councils, student ambassadors
- Mentoring and coaching
- Assessment for Learning through self and peer assessment

Creativity encourages and develops questioning, debate, reflection and collaboration. Creative practices therefore provide ideal vehicles to explore and promote co-construction in the classroom and beyond.

Endnotes

1. Hargreaves, David (2006) *A new shape for schooling?* Specialist Schools and Academies Trust.
2. Freelance creative project manager responsible for managing the process of a creative partnership within a school.
3. One-year Creative Partnerships project.
4. Participating in the Change Schools Programme – a three-year programme promoting sustained change in schools through creativity.
5. The school lost its Art teacher in 2010 so the project also aimed to improve staff skills and confidence in engaging pupils in art activities.
6. Games, group work, movement, music (while working), problem solving, relevance, lesson review, teacher involvement and visual work.
7. From the Planning Form.
8. The schools began to work together in April 2010 under the leadership of the Junior School Headteacher who was appointed as Head of the new school.
9. Flutter and Rudduck (2004), *Consulting pupils: What's in it for schools?*, Routledge Falmer.

A New Direction

A New Direction is an organisation that works with and for young Londoners, providing powerful ways for them to access the best of arts and culture.

We do this by working with London's creative and cultural sector, schools and other partners, to generate more opportunities for young people to take part in arts and culture and develop their own creativity.

Through our work, more young people are able to develop their own talents and passion for the arts, and we are committed to helping more young people to identify, experience and move into careers within the creative and cultural sector.

From Spring 2012, we will take a strategic lead for children, young people and the arts in London, working alongside Arts Council England, and in partnership with Apples and Snakes, the Lyric Hammersmith, the Roundhouse and Sadler's Wells.

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