

Year Two Report: Build and Test

# Penryn Creativity Collaborative Action Research Report

## Research Question:

How might immersive 'real-world' experiences influence empowered action in teenagers?

## Lead Action Research Teacher:

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## Creativity Collaboratives Network Partner:

KEAP (Kernow Education Arts Partnership)



# KEAP



## Penryn Creativity Collaborative Action Research Report

This Action Research project is part of the Penryn Creativity Collaboratives.

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### CONTEXT

Creativity Collaboratives is a national pilot programme of eight clusters of schools across England who are working together to test innovative practices in teaching for creativity, sharing learning to facilitate system-wide change. The programme, launched in October 2021, is funded by Arts Council England with generous support from the Freelands Foundation. Creativity Collaboratives: Penryn Partnership is the Southwest pilot for the programme and over the course of three years is focused on exploring one central question:

Does teaching creativity across the curriculum lead to young people who are better prepared for their future in a changing workforce?

The Penryn Creativity Collaborative is led by Penryn College with eight local primary schools and research partner, the School of Education at the University of Exeter. This report presents findings from one of thirteen action research projects which took place during Year 2 of the Penryn Creativity Collaboratives programme. Each action research project was led by a teacher with students from their own school, included a link with a partner from a local industry and the lead teacher was supported by researchers from the University of Exeter through a programme of training and mentoring.

Full findings from Year 2 can be found in the research report. To cite this report please use:

**Crickmay, U. Childs, S. Chappell, K. (2023).** *Preparing for a Creative Future: Year Two Report Build and Test* <https://penryn-college.cornwall.sch.uk/creativity-collaboratives>

This action research project took place in Penryn College, an 11-16 school on the south Cornish coast, England. A lively, thriving and oversubscribed school, Penryn College prides itself on offering the very best for their students. This project was led by Bethany Herring, teacher of English at Penryn College and involved a group of 31 Year 9 students (aged 13 and 14).

As a secondary school English teacher, I am interested in exploring ideas around empowered action in teenagers. Empowered action can be defined as 'foregrounding pupil's own agency in creative action. As a skill, this includes the ability to take risks and question accepted ideas, the capacity to be immersed and the ability to act on creative ideas' (Crickmay, Childs & Chappell, 2023, p. 32). My interest in this area stems from the sense that exams are driving learning, particularly in English. Since the removal of coursework and the introduction of a 100% exam-based English qualification in 2015, it has felt to me as if teachers are, perhaps understandably, inclined to 'teach to the test' and have begun to move away from the sorts of collaborative, immersive experiences that we might once have used more readily as a structure for lessons. This study was designed with this in mind – not as a completely new set of teaching ideas or methods to introduce to students, but as an opportunity to explore the value of immersion and collaboration in my subject.

The role of the industry partner in this project was to collaborate on ideas for the intervention and for inspiring creative practices through CPD (Continued Professional Development) sessions. I met with Amanda Harris, Director of KEAP (Kernow Education Arts Partnership) to discuss ideas relating to innovation and immersion.

I also attended the 'Imagination Firelighters' workshop, led by The Writers' Block, which aimed to showcase techniques to inspire creative writing and thinking in children.

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I had the fantastic opportunity to organise a trip to The Hall for Cornwall for my Year 9 students for the day, to see a variety of Creative Companies based in Cornwall. The Imagination Unleashed Event at HfC explored CreaTech, which is where creativity meets technology, inspiring new ways of telling stories, engaging audiences and driving business growth. It showcased some of the best examples of Cornwall's CreaTech innovation and gave students the opportunity to explore possible careers in the creative industry through a short series of panel events and workshops.

### DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

#### Creative Skills

The research drew on the Penryn Partnership Creative Skills Framework developed during Year 1 of the Penryn Creativity Collaboratives programme (Crickmay, Childs & Chappell, 2023). The framework defined creative skills in a five-part model, and this action research focused on two sections of this model as follows:

#### Empowered action

Foregrounding pupils' own agency in creative action, as a skill this includes the ability to take risks and question accepted ideas, the capacity to be immersed, and the ability to act on creative ideas.

#### Generating new ideas that matter

This includes the ability to combine innovation with critical attention to the consequences of ideas, considering the ethical impact of creative actions and understanding diverse values.

#### Immersive experiences

In my practice, I define immersive experiences as situations or opportunities for students to become fully immersed or absorbed in a task, whether through collaboration, real-world scenarios or involving an element of competition.

### AIM OF THE RESEARCH

The main aim of this project was to explore how collaborative, immersive experiences in the classroom affect teenagers' responses in English. With the constraints of a tightly packed, GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) driven curriculum, it can be easy to overlook the value of collaborative or immersive methods in the classroom. Allowing students time and space to explore ideas can feel risky as a teacher with a clear set of aims to achieve in a short amount of time. The constraints that we feel as teachers to ensure students understand the content and skills required to pass exams, are perhaps reflected in the more formulaic approaches to structuring lessons. I am interested to see what empowered action looks and feels like in an English setting and how we might be able to adapt our practice to enable students to become more empowered as learners. How can we develop our skills as teachers and carve out time and space in the curriculum for collaborative, 'real-world' projects that may result in more empowered learners?

### The Specific Issues the Study Tackled

- Do we give students enough time and space to be creative?
- Could we encourage students to take more risks if they were presented with a real-world issue or real-world audiences?
- If we allowed students to take the lead and direct their own learning, would it be effective?
- If students are immersed in what they are doing, does that motivate them to drive their own learning forward?

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### METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS

The group participating in this study was a class of 31 Year 9 (aged 13-14) mixed gender students of middle to high ability.

I designed an intervention project that formed part of the non-fiction writing unit in Year 9. The unit requires students to understand rhetorical devices that are typically used in non-fiction, such as hyperbole or questioning and are required to use these devices in a piece of non-fiction writing. The assessment at the end of the unit is based on a generic writing task, typical of the GCSE English Language Paper 2 questions (the Assessment and Qualification Alliance Exam Board (AQA)). Students don't choose the topic or have time to research the topic. They are able to invent statistics and examples to support their argument when they write. A typical question could be, for example: 'Teenagers are hooked on social media and this is detrimental to their mental health. Write an article for a magazine where you answer for or against this statement.' My intervention was designed to immerse the students in the topic beforehand and to allow them to choose the area they would like to research (within certain parameters). It was designed to be a collaborative project with a real-world audience, to see how this affected their motivation, their ideas overall and the work they produced.

Firstly, the students were asked a philosophical question: do words have the power to change the world? This prompted initial ideas and discussion. They were then asked to consider whether we, as individuals, had any power to change the state of society. Finally, they were introduced to a local councillor who presented ideas about ways to make changes in society. They were set the challenge of creating their own pressure groups that would later be judged as part of a competition. The students formed groups, decided on the issue they would tackle and started creating campaigning material that they were told could be used in a real setting (e.g., they could create a letter that could be sent to an actual MP). The project was designed to last for four weeks and the students were given deadlines for the various components of their campaign.

### Data Collection

At the start of the project, six students formed a focus group and were asked questions about what creativity means to them and how they feel it manifests in different subject settings. The group consisted of three girls and three boys of middle-high ability in English. During the project, the same six students were asked questions about their experiences of the work and how they felt that this was impacting on their understanding of the non-fiction topic, as well as their feelings towards collaborative work and the project in general. This was used as a transcript in the final data analysis. I took photographs of the students while they worked and of the work produced at the end of the project.

### Data Analysis

The information was analysed via immersion in all the data, followed by transcription of selected audio data. Photographs were analysed using the See, Think, Wonder technique from Harvard Project Zero. All data was then systematically coded using low level through to higher level coding which led to a thematic analysis. This is written up below in this report.

### Ethical Research Practice

Ethical research practice was ensured by following the ethical guidelines of the University of Exeter ethics committee which are grounded in the British Educational Research Association (2018) guidelines; protocols involved seeking informed consent for all research activity from all participants alongside careful data protection practices.

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### MAIN FINDINGS

My findings centered around two main creative skills: empowered action (as defined earlier) and generating new ideas that matter or innovation. During data analysis, I noticed that there were several sub-themes emerging, which I discuss below.

#### Creative Skills

##### Empowered action (including risk taking, immersion and taking action)

It is clear from the data overall that students were able to become fully immersed in this project for a variety of reasons. The collaborative nature of the project meant that students had a shared goal to work towards which increased their sense of commitment to the tasks set. They had agency over the issue that they wanted to create their pressure groups around, which was important to them and provided currency. It was also clear that the real-world aspect of the project increased motivation and engagement.

Collaboration was intrinsically linked to empowered action: students refer to combining their strengths and ideas and how this can help them to feel more confident and more able to take risks.

*“As we’ve got to do different bits of the campaign so far we can add in bits that we’re better at...”*  
Year 9 student, focus group at the start of the action research.

Question: do words have the power to change the world? This led to a discussion around topics to use as part of their individual campaigns.

Creative freedom, or the ability to choose the direction of the learning was an important feature of the project for the students. This element resulted in students acting independently as they felt more connected to the work and therefore more motivated.

*“You get to develop your own ideas and, like, but you can also create your own...like even if it’s based off other things you can add your own elements to it that might change, like, the story or whatever you want.”*

Year 9 student describing their ideas on creative freedom in English,  
focus group at start of the action research project.

There is evidence in the focus group to support this, where students have linked this freedom to being more emotionally connected to their work. Additionally, I found that one important aspect to creative freedom for students is the idea that it is somehow linked to judgement. Many students commented on the notion that when there is no set ‘correct’ answer to strive to find, it removes the fear of judgement and creates a less inhibited, more empowered learner overall.

*“We are able to voice our opinions without being judged so it isn’t like there is one correct answer - we can take the risk with lots of different answers.”*

Year 9 student reflecting on the nature of the collaborative style-project, reflection interview.

The real-world aspect to this project increased students’ ability to become immersed. The knowledge that their ideas and work will be shared with real people working in a particular industry appears to be one of the key factors in building resilience, confidence and enjoyment. Students felt motivated by the idea of a real-world link to the community (in this case a local MP) as it gave them a sense of purpose and context for their work, giving it more currency.

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*"We're focusing on writing for a target audience for real- because we know that Mrs X is coming back in and we're presenting to her, so we've got to get our persuasive skills aimed at her and we're focusing on that instead."*

Year 9 student reflecting on the nature of 'real-world' audience for the project, reflection interview.

It was also interesting to note that students felt more of a connection with the knowledge and skills that they had previously been taught (in this case as part of the non-fiction writing unit) when they were able to see how this could be applied to a task with a real-world audience. They worked hard in their groups to use these skills to the highest standard and to produce work that fulfilled the brief. They could see the meaning behind the prior learning which gave it credibility; at the same time, they weren't seeing the skills as separate from the goal, which was to showcase their work to a real audience.

*"If we were doing this in a normal lesson, we'd be looking at the skills separately, so this way seems way more logical if you know what I mean?"*

Year 9 student reflecting on non-fiction skills, reflective interview.

### Generating new ideas that matter

The study showed that students see the value of the skills that they are learning when they are asked to apply them to something they care about. They talk a lot about the time and space needed to develop ideas and be innovative themselves.

*"I've got kind of creating and developing ideas and making sure that they're unique but also realistic and then eventually we end up producing a piece of sort of material work based off of the ideas you came up with. You need time to do this though."*

Year 9 student discussing ideas around creativity, focus group at start of project.

The students discuss how to combine their previous knowledge in English and other subjects, with the challenge or aims of their work - they feel that a real context or audience helps them to be more innovative as they have a more relevant target for their work. The element of competition is also mentioned as a motivating factor.

*"We've been using skills from IT to get the pages looking professional which is a good feeling."*

Year 9 student discussing transferrable skills, reflections during project.

Students refer to using previously acquired skills innately when the focus of the work is motivating and engaging. They refer to these skills in terms of how they will improve the result, rather than as separate skills that simply must be learnt as part of the non-fiction unit.

*"We are using our persuasive skills with the letter to the M.P and the website too because we are going to actually email the letter, so it needs to be good and checked over and stuff."*

Year 9 student reflecting on aspect of 'real-world' learning, reflections during project.

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### DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE PROJECT AND FINDINGS

This study has confirmed to me that making the time and space for creativity in the secondary classroom is vital if we want to equip teenagers with the kinds of skills that they so clearly need for the future, as demonstrated in the Penryn Creativity Collaboratives Year 1 Report (Crickmay, Childs & Chappell, 2023). This type of collaborative work is not new; many teachers have used these sorts of practices before and yet the tendency to base a lesson around content and skills to fulfill the requirements of the exam specification is becoming all too familiar in recent years. Although a small step, the study has reaffirmed the importance of allowing students creative freedom in the classroom for them to feel a sense of agency. Planning lessons around the creative skills of empowered action: risk-taking, questioning assumptions or making mistakes would be a worthwhile challenge. If we want students to be able to see the value in this, then we ought to be brave enough to take those steps ourselves as practitioners. The study has shown me that incorporating elements of real-world scenarios into the English classroom would certainly motivate many students and encourage them to feel more connected - not just to the work they are producing but to the wider community.

Although my research was primarily centered around the use of creative skills, a lot of my findings link more directly with creative pedagogy or teaching for creativity. This links to the wider Penryn project as defined in the Year one report (Penryn Creativity Collaboratives, *Preparing for a Creative Future*), particularly with empowerment, autonomy and agency of both teachers and learners.

This is defined in the framework under two bullet points: learners and teachers both have a sense of agency and are allowed to express themselves and students are empowered to act independently and with agency (exerting power), developing and trying out their ideas (A Definition of Creative Pedagogies, Year one Report, Pg. 42). This became a focal point of the research as I reflected on the restrictions I feel in my role as teacher and the lack of agency that results from examination pressures. It strikes me that to truly empower the students to act with autonomy and agency, we must also feel empowered to explore teaching ideas unhindered by assessment restrictions. The lack of time and space to become immersed or to explore possibilities within a piece of work, was clearly voiced by students but appears to reflect the wider restrictions faced by teachers in a system which is designed to address content linked directly with examinations within tight deadlines.

These findings also create an exciting opportunity to consider the value of collaborative work at secondary level. Students are familiar with collaborating in subjects inked with Creative Arts, but less so in other subjects including English. Students clearly value collaborative experience: they commented on the instinctive process of combining strengths within a group to achieve a common goal. Creating opportunities for students to collaborate as a natural part of the learning process in all subjects would be a fantastic outcome of the study.

The highlight of this process overall has been to reignite a curiosity in me about the value of creativity in the classroom. In many ways it has taught me to take a step back and to allow the students more agency over their learning. There are variables to this of course; the study that I carried out was based around middle-high ability students who are self-motivated and keen to achieve. The students are also in Year 9. As they move up into Year 10, time restrictions become tighter as teachers cover the content required for the exams. If the study were to be repeated, it would be interesting to see the effects of this type of immersive experience with a group of disengaged students, or whether it would be valued in the same way by students in Key Stage 4.

### REFERENCES

Crickmay, U. Childs, S. Chappell, K. (2023). *Preparing for a Creative Future: year one Report Question, Challenge and Explore*. <https://penryn-college.cornwall.sch.uk/creativity-collaboratives>



# Creative Skills

PENRYN PARTNERSHIP

“Does teaching creativity across the curriculum lead to young people who are better prepared for their future in a changing workforce?”

