

Year Two Report: Build and Test

# Penryn Creativity Collaborative Action Research Report

## Research Question:

How do risk, immersion and play influence creativity in a Key Stage 3 English classroom?

## 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.

To cite the report please use:

**Manclark, H. (2023).** *How do risk, immersion and play influence creativity in a Key Stage 3 English classroom?* Penryn Creativity Collaboratives. <https://penryn-college.cornwall.sch.uk/creativity-collaboratives>

### 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 involved Year 8 (aged 12-13) English pupils at Penryn College Secondary School in Penryn, Cornwall. It was led by Holly Manclark, who is an English Teacher at the school.

The role of industry partner, KEAP, was to provide CPD sessions which introduced workshop ideas that were adapted to take back into the classroom. During two sessions, resources and lesson ideas were provided around immersive experiences, using a variety of objects to inspire and stimulate creative responses from students.

### DEFINITION OF 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:

- **Being imaginative and playful:** This is the ability to utilise imagination, to improvise playfully and to generate and try out possibilities: as with possibility thinking, it is the ability to go beyond an understanding of 'what is' to consider instead 'what might be'.
- **Empowered Action:** Foregrounding of pupil's agency in creative action, as a skill this includes the ability take risk and question accepted ideas, the capacity to be immersed, and the ability to act on creative ideas.

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### Creative Pedagogies

The research drew on the Penryn Partnership Creative Pedagogies Framework developed during Year 1 of the Penryn Creativity Collaboratives programme (Crickmay, Childs & Chappell, 2023). This framework used two prior reviews of creative pedagogies: Cremin & Chappell's (2019) systematic literature review of 30 years of empirical research on this topic, which identified a series of seven features characteristic of creative pedagogies, and Chappell et al.'s (2016) review which identified a series of eight features of creative transdisciplinary science and arts teaching. This action research focussed on the creative pedagogy, 'risk, immersion, and play', but also drew on aspects of a second pedagogical strategy which is about 'empowerment, autonomy and agency':

#### **Risk, immersion and play:**

- Teaching/ facilitation creates space for these three processes to occur
- A trusting space is developed in which mistakes are possible and failure can be accepted.

#### **Empowerment, autonomy and agency:**

- Learners and teachers both have a sense of agency and are allowed to express themselves.
- Students are empowered to act independently and with agency (exerting power), developing and trying out their own ideas.

### AIM OF THE RESEARCH

The participant group was selected because although they are a high achieving group, their work often lacked originality. Teacher observations and students' work prior to the project, showed that students in the group want to do well but were preoccupied with writing what they thought would get them a high mark and often regurgitated what had been studied, rather than using creative skills to produce something more unique. To get the above expected high grades at this level, their creative writing needs to show 'flair' and originality in thought as well as having the technical knowledge to be able to articulate this on the page. The knowledge is there but the students lacked confidence to go beyond the ordinary.

As a teacher, I was interested in how we can facilitate and create a space that allows for creative skills to flourish. Would a more immersive experience aid their writing? How can I give students their own agency in order to take some risks in their writing? How can play be incorporated into a lesson? The project allowed me to look at what barriers were preventing me from allowing my students to become fully immersed and independent learners as well as an opportunity to try out ideas gained from two workshops.

This culminated in the research question: How do Risk Taking, Immersion and Play influence creativity in a KS3 English classroom?

### METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS

#### What Happened

The participant group was a KS3 English class of 32 Year 8s (aged 12-13) of a high ability. Of this group 16 young people agreed to be included in the research. The main aim of the project was to examine and use creative skills explicitly in order to generate originality in the student's work. The focus was on risk taking, immersion and play and a series of lessons were designed to facilitate this.

Following two CPD sessions with KEAP: Writers' Block called 'Imagination Firefighters' a series of three lessons were planned hoping to focus on the skills of risk taking, immersion and play. The lessons took place over the course of six weeks.

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The first lesson was a 'free writing' lesson where students were given an image as a stimulus. Rather than being given a check list of devices to include in the writing, students were simply told to write and not to overthink it. This was to promote risk taking so that students can make mistakes and deliver surprising ideas.

The second lesson was in response to a workshop by Writers' Block whereby students had to respond and improvise with an object that they were given. They generated ideas and then had to pick a narrative to write up. This was designed in order to focus on play as there was an element of responding on the spot.

The third lesson was also in response to a workshop by Writers' Block whereby students were asked to close their eyes and listen to a sound to generate ideas and then being given a slightly moving image with sound as a stimulus. The lights were reduced to create a more immersive experience. The students had time and space in order to become fully immersed in this lesson.

### METHODS

Data was collected during each of the three focused lessons as follows:

- Focus group – one focus group with 6 students focusing on what creativity meant to them
- Observations during which a teacher completed a 'creative skills wheel' for 4 of the students conducting during one of the target lessons
- Student journals – 6 students who were from the target group, were given A5 booklets in which to write down their ideas prior to a task. They completed the tasks during the target lessons in these journals and completed some reflection tasks after as well
- Creative Wheel – For the observations, I used the 'Preparing for a Creative Future' wheel which is a data collection tool that was designed for the Penryn Creativity Collaboratives project. Around the edge of it includes the five-part definition of creative skills developed during year 1 of the project, with each skill broken down into three detailed section. Inside the wheel, teachers or students can mark whether they noticed each of the skills being used a little, some or lots.

### DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis was carried out via immersion in all data, followed by transcription of selected audio and film-based data. 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. The data consisted of student journals as well as a transcription of a student interview. Also included were creative wheels, which were used during observations whilst the class carried out a task.

### 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

### Creative Skills

The data showed that students were developing their creative skills as follows:

#### Empowered action

##### Risk taking

There is strong evidence for students' risk taking by challenging assumptions, making mistakes and delivering surprising results. This is clear in students' work. An example to show how this manifested in the project is an extract from Septimus Smith's journal. Here the student wrote a narrative piece inspired by sound. The sound stimulus was generated by crunching paper. The students had their eyes closed and had to imagine what this could be the sound of. They then had to 'free write' for several minutes based on what they heard.

"Leaves crackle underfoot.

It was a misty October, pine cones line the floor, evergreen trees stand dormant, scratch marks and bites carved into the bark of a birch, a half-eaten rabbit, freshly killed, white fur is damp and coating the orange leaves.

The cold air bites my fingertips, crows caw impatiently, announcing my fate, an omen of death.

Fallen leaves crackle underfoot, I see a misty clearing, a tunnel of silver light awaits like a holy beacon. Shadows are cast, unrecognisable: they are large shadows, huge. Into the clearing I walk, anxiety coursing through my nerves, paralysing me from within. As I go, dead silence, then I hear a noise. Crickets croaking in the grass. I see the carcass of a deer, once again fresh, a doe. A horrific sight, its ribcage torn open, internal organs half gone. I see its head, still connected by its neck, but by a tendon. Its eyes have been gorged out, leaving empty sockets.

I turn to leave, sweat dripping down my face like rain drops. Yet when I turn, met by more trees, utterly lost, I panic. I cannot remember where I came from, and whatever had slaughtered the animals was (clearly) unnatural and I was in its den." (Transcribed from the original journal entry below).

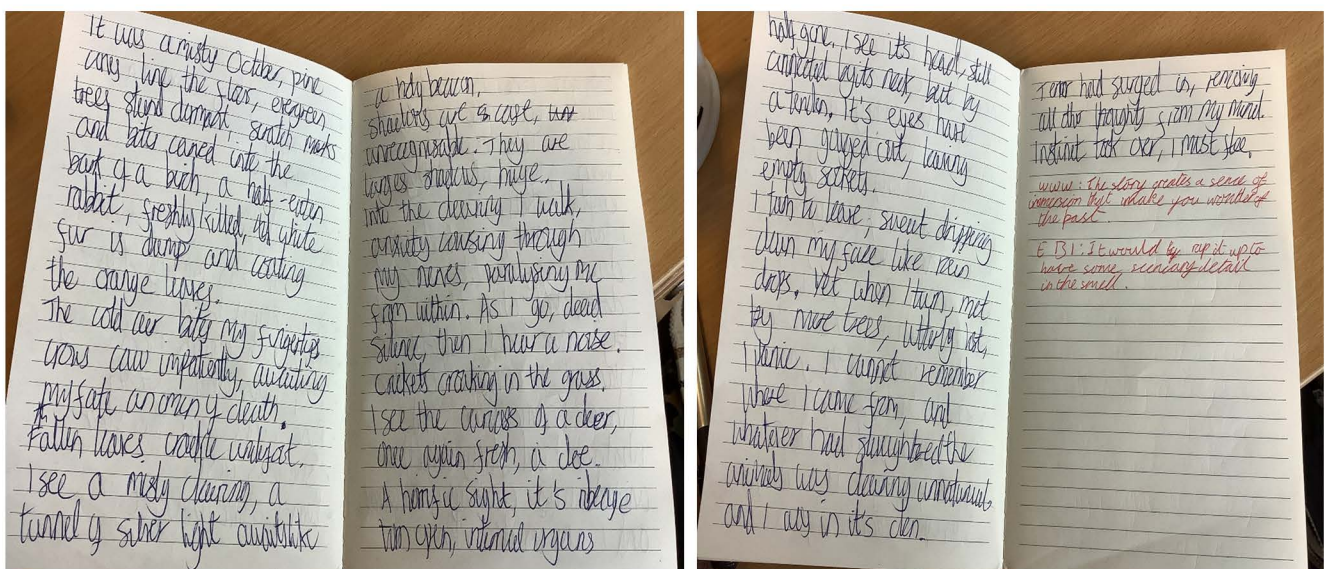


Figure 1: Original journal entry

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What is interesting from this piece of work, is that the student has taken a risk by not fully planning out their response first. The student is used to having a check list of ‘success criteria’ that they have to work from with language devices (similes, metaphors, adjectives, sensory detail). This can often lead to a prescriptive and disjointed narrative. Here the student has included many of the language features listed above but has woven them into their narrative rather than including them as stand-alone sentences. For example, the student writes ‘leaves crackle underfoot’ as a single line paragraph. The sensory detail is used well, immersing the reader into the short narrative without being too preoccupied with a plot. This is seen again in the line, ‘the cold air bites my fingertips, crows caw impatiently, announcing my fate, an omen of death.’

The student is explicitly told not to worry about correct punctuation and grammar, so the risk they have to take that they are not being grammatically correct is reduced. The student can then go back and edit the work to use punctuation effectively rather than break the flow of the writing process.

This is an extended example and explanation of how students produced work during the project that was more original and less prescribed through the ‘free writing’ process, contrasting with previous writing tasks which have often produced disjointed, regurgitated responses.

This is reinforced through an observation note based on the Creative Skills Wheel which was completed during the same ‘free writing’ activity. This student was asked what they thought about having the freedom to write rather than working to a checklist. They commented with ‘no expectations therefore less risk’. The teacher is able to build the students’ confidence which leads to greater immersion.

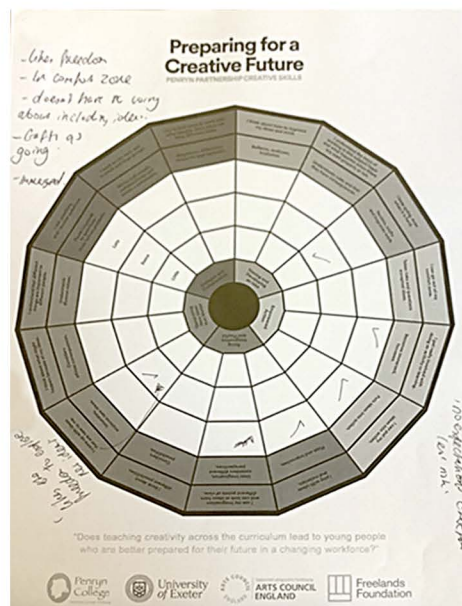


Figure 2: Wheel 3 includes comments from the student during the observation.

Data from student journals indicated that students also perceived they were taking risks in their work, for example, Peter Walsh’s journal entry discusses ‘trial and error’ in response to being asked what do you think are creative skills?

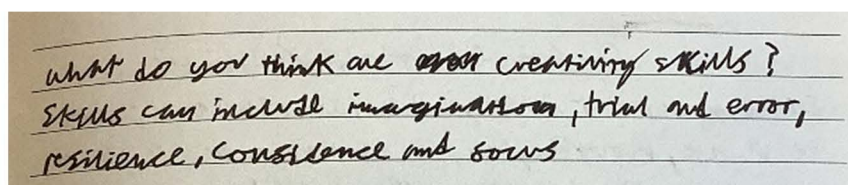


Figure 3: Peter Walsh journal entry

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The term was further explored through class discussions and the teacher noted that trial and error was defined in this case as the process of editing and improving a piece of work until the student was happy with it. This would suggest that students view writing as a process that needs to be worked on in order to get the desired result. It was also noted that students felt that this was something that they do in science and maths to achieve the ‘correct’ answer but found it to be more of an abstract idea in English. This made me reflect on whether students need to have an idea of what they deem successful in order to know when they have a finished piece. By having a clear idea of what they want to achieve, they may well be more willing to take risks in their writing rather than ‘playing it safe’ by regurgitating known sentences and ideas. However, it also made me question whether students had a full understanding of what ‘risk taking’ meant in relation to their creative work and this is something that I could explore further.

### *Immersion*

There was also strong evidence to show immersion being a factor influencing creativity. For example, during a ‘free writing’ lesson in which an observer completed Wheel 4 (Figure 4 below), the observer noticed this and gave more ticks in the section labelled ‘being immersed/focused and persists, crafts and improves work’. It was noted that when the student felt like their views and ideas were valid, immersion in the task was then seen. The fear of failure or the fear of not getting things right is a barrier to students being fully immersed as they were often preoccupied with checking that they are doing it correctly. By removing the requirements imposed by success criteria, students were less concerned with whether they were right and could enjoy the creative process. They were able to trust their own ideas and in doing so take greater risks in their writing.

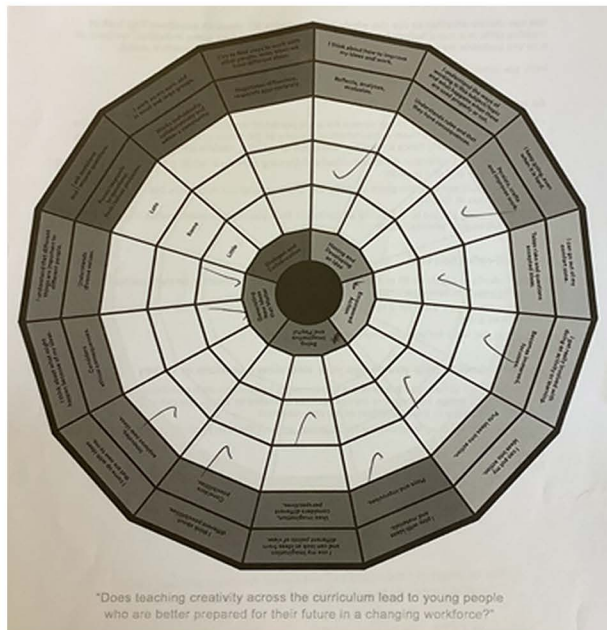


Figure 4: Wheel 4 completed by an observer during a ‘free writing’ lesson

### *Taking action*

Taking action was evident throughout the project. The Year 8 focus group, which was carried out at the beginning of the Action Research Group, discussed what creativity meant to them. In answer to the question about being creative and what they thought being imaginative is, a student answered ‘I think it’s, like, coming up with new ideas and then, like, because you’re being creative which means that you’re, like, thinking of new things.’ The lessons were designed to enable students to produce original work through a series of unfamiliar activities. They all produced work that was original and that they were proud of. They had to use their own ideas then put those ideas into action. The focus group showed that being an active learner and putting ideas into practice enabled creativity.

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## Being imaginative and playful

There was strong evidence to show that play was a key factor in influencing creativity in English lessons. During a ‘free writing’ lesson based on the ‘Imagination Firelighters’ workshop, four students were observed. Students were given an ‘ASMR’ (autonomous sensory meridian response) Image – a slightly moving image with atmospheric sounds. The image was of a library scene with just a crackling fire and sounds of rain outside. Again, the brief was simply to write ‘freely’, with no success criteria. The open-ended brief and inclusion of a moving image rather than a static one allowed for a more immersive experience which drew on a range of senses rather than just the visual.

Observations using the creative skills wheels and conversations based on these included multiple mentions of play and trying things out. The student journals also included mentions of having ‘no limits’ and considering different perspectives. An example is on the Wheel observation below (Figure 5) where the student is noted as discussing ‘play(ing) with ideas’ and having the ‘freedom’ to do what they want.

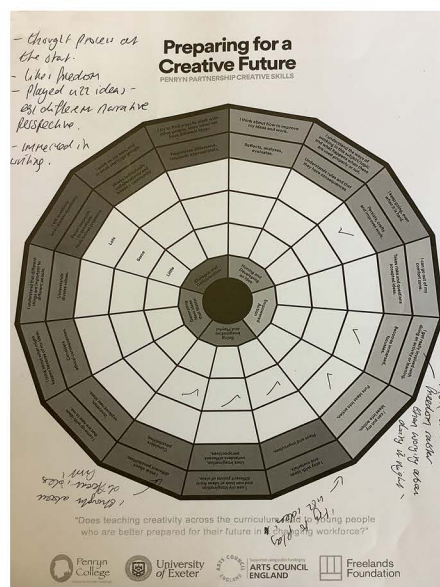


Figure 5: Wheel 1 from an observed ‘free writing lesson’.

This was further supported by evidence from the year 8 focus group, conducted at the beginning of the project. When students were asked which creative skill they thought was the most important they responded with, ‘I think the playing one is quite important’ and like when you are just playing you can kind of just do whatever you want with it’.

## Creative pedagogies

There was evidence that the following creative pedagogies were utilised during the project as follows:

**Empowerment, Autonomy, Agency:** Learners and teachers both have a sense of agency and are allowed to express themselves.

There was strong evidence through the work that the students produced that when students were given agency, they were more immersed in their work and therefore expressed themselves in more original ways. The agency came in the form of freedom, specifically in this context, freedom to go wherever they want with a piece of writing. One example of this is in a student’s writing in their journal after they had been played an ASMR video. The lights in the room were turned down and students were asked to close their eyes and listen before free writing for 20 minutes.

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The response from student Clarissa Dalloway was as follows:

'I come out from the cover of the rocks. Very quickly, my hair is damp and raindrops dribble off my head. I look up towards the sky. The rain comes in through the tree tops like an army running to battle. It blinds me. I shade my eyes from the rain and look to my left towards the depths of the forest. The thick fog that seemed miles away only an hour ago had now invaded the calm opening of the rocks. Shadows and dark figures take advantage of the cover of the fog and play with my eyes, running too and from each tree. They thought of being watched takes over me and I freeze up. I can hear them now. Creeping closer, and closer. They're behind me. I spin round. Nothing. To my relief, the powerful moonlight beamed through the branches of the trees, creating a safe haven around me.

The shadows stop haunting me, but the noises start. Crows the colour of midnight echo through the woods. My minds playing tricks on me again. It's sounds like they're calling me, talking to me. Trying to communicate and call for help. Or they're warning me. The calls fade into heavy rainfall, and I'm soaking wet again. It's deafening now. So deafening I can't hear the shadows forming to beings. So deafening it consumes me and I don't notice the moonlight shy away. So deafening I don't hear or see the figure wrapping it's claws around my face.'

The scene that was depicted in the image did have the sound of rain, and mist was visually displayed, but the students could go anywhere they wanted to with the narrative. Clarissa Dalloway's narrative was unique compared to other students' work, and this was the case for all of the students in the group. Therefore, students felt empowered to act independently when they felt like they had the freedom to express themselves.

### Risk, immersion and play

*Teaching/facilitation creates space for these three processes to occur*

As a direct consequence of the workshops with the industry partner, I focused on creating a fully immersive space in the classroom.

One example of this was a lesson that began with a starter activity where students had to close their eyes and listen to a sound made by the teacher. The sound I chose was paper being rustled then clapped together. These actions were slowed down and then sped up to simulate different sounds. Students were asked to simply write down what they thought the sounds reminded them of.

Sally Seton in her journal, described the sounds as reminding them of the following: Wild, cold, footsteps, snow, crunching, bleak, weather,

Students were then asked to write a short narrative or the start of a story based on what they heard. They were given 3 minutes. Sally Seton wrote:

'The rain blows across my face as I run, branches whip across my bare legs, my shirt snags on thorns ripping at my shoulder. Shadows move in the distance and the wind howls ominously singing it's tune of sorrow. Branches snap beneath my feet as I fly past and crows screech in the distance. Something moves behind me, a shadow slowly catching up with my own. Gasping, I turn my head, but nothing's there. I am alone. I start running again, faster, and faster now. I am alone, I must be but soon I hear footsteps behind me, getting louder and louder. I stop and spin around but nothing's there. I start again, running away as fast as I can, desperate to get away. But as I run, I feel a pull, on my wrist, pulling me back into the trees. I stop, again, still feeling the pull. Nothings there. I am alone.'

You can see in this description that the student has incorporated many of the sounds that they heard. 'footsteps' the 'rain'. This immersive space facilitated the student to create an original response to this task.

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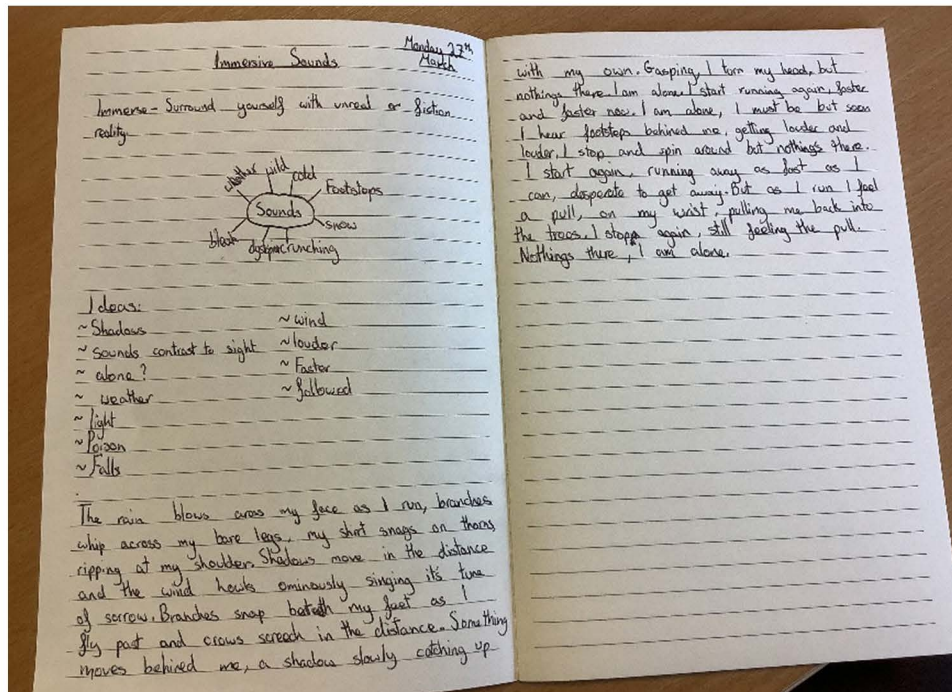


Figure 6: Photograph of the original – Sally Seton’s journal

Another example was a lesson which began with the students selecting an object for their table from a collection in a ‘writing box’ put together by the teacher. Students each took turns to look at their object, hold it in their hands and then discuss multiple interpretations. The students then had just two minutes to speed-write a narrative or the start of a narrative – the faster they write the better.

Sally Seton chose the seashells and wrote:

‘The cries of gulls echoes through the hollow shell. The waves wash over my mind and sharpens my thoughts, clearing out the doubt and worries, replacing them with a calm sense of belonging. Warm beams of sunlight warn my heart. The beach reflected in this beautiful creation of the sea.’

What was interesting about this piece was that sound imagery was used as a way in to more introspective thoughts. Being given time and space to hold the shell, to put it to their ear as well as discuss their ideas as a table, allowed for some really thoughtful and perceptive sentences that all link and have created a complete narrative in just a few lines. It does not appear to be rushed, despite the aim of writing as fast as possible.

A trusting space is developed in which mistakes are possible and failure can be accepted. These focused lessons gave the teacher time and space in order to facilitate risk, immersion and play. Across each of the immersive writing sessions, there was no pressure to produce work, grade and give feedback within a set timeframe, so teachers were able to give time over to the tasks. This facilitated and nurtured students to take risks, immerse themselves in the task and to play around with ideas.

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### DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE PROJECT AND FINDINGS

The significance of the findings has shown that the pressures of a Key Stage 3 English curriculum and the need for data can stifle creativity. The pressure comes from having a content heavy curriculum with key skills being derived directly from the GCSE specification that they take at the end of Key Stage 4, aged 16. The need for data (qualitative grades) as well as formative feedback often drives our curriculum more than anything else. There often does not appear to be enough time to go into greater depth. This implies that pressure has an adverse impact on the development of creative skills.

The CPD sessions allowed me to rediscover how to spark a child's imagination and to give time and space allowing for more freedom. It was also apparent that the language I used had the potential to empower students. The lessons were not drastically different from what they had done before, yet they were framed as being 'immersive' experiences or encouraged students to 'play' around with an idea. The retraction of check lists or success criteria gave students a sense of freedom. It was noted in the students' work that they naturally included some key technical elements in their writing, such as including metaphors and the use of the senses. This latter element, the use of senses, was particularly apparent in the immersive sounds lesson.

Students in this study are of a high ability and as such have a secure command of the English language. They have good written language skills with correct spelling, punctuation and grammar. They are also technically proficient – they are able to use the language devices taught in previous years without that element needing to be retaught. For example, they all had the ability to be able to use devices such as metaphors, similes, onomatopoeia, pathetic fallacy etc. Students with a lower ability may need more teacher input in order to write coherent sentences and link ideas. This is where writing frames and sentence starters help. The research showed that at this higher level, giving too much guidance, in the form of a success criteria or check lists may stifle their creativity as students then feel that they have to include everything in order to gain full marks.

The immersion part of the research question was the most surprising. Preparing students in KS3 for the rigors of the KS4 English Language exams means that we often filter down tasks that directly link to the exam questions. This is why we often use a still image as a stimulus. However, it was clear that immersion via engaging multiple senses and giving time and space to become absorbed and concentrate, elicited richer narratives from the students. Using these tools in KS3 could help students generate original ideas in KS4: it would provide a base of experience and skills for when they embark on their KS4 journey. This is something that will be considered when planning our creative writing units of work for KS3 in future.

Highlights from the project were having discussions with the students around creativity and how it can help them in the future. Reigniting their imagination with the immersive experience class was a really positive experience. There is so much that can be done to build upon that original lesson, combining it with some of the other creative skills such as collaboration, and honing and developing an idea. This highlights the potential for a shift to a more project-based assessment in KS3 which may enable a more creative curriculum offer.

Being able to give time and space to these students to facilitate these lessons highlighted how little time we have during a unit of study to cover the content then prepare for an end of unit assessment. It is suggested that having less assessment points during the year for KS3 may allow for more time and space to work on these creative skills so that when students begin KS4 and must be more focused on passing exams, they are equipped to be able to do this more independently.

### 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>

Kernow Education Art Partnership. <https://www.keap.org.uk>

The Writers' Block. <https://thewritersblock.org.uk>



# 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?”

