

# **Outstanding Teaching, Learning and Assessment (OTLA) Action Research Project**

## **Motivating Learners with Creative Writing**

**Myerscough College – June 2022**

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For further information regarding the Shaping Success Action Research programme and this project go to <https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla-8/>.

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# Motivating Learners with Creative Writing

## Myerscough College

### SUMMARY

This project was designed to motivate learners at our land-based FE college to have an enjoyment of English through using creative writing. Through a series of activities, workshops and competitions, learners were enthused into the subject.

### RATIONALE

Learners who attend our college attend with the intention of following their passion or chosen career subject and see English (and maths) resits as an unwanted addition. Work is needed to change this perception and to inspire learners in order to find an enjoyment of the subject instead. 'Teaching English and maths in FE: what works for vocational learners?' (Allen, 2017) highlights the need for a motivational aspect in teaching English, relating to learners' skills and interests and building on these. The project's intention was to spark an interest in learners, through the use of creative writing tasks, a means of expression that has previously been seen as the most 'fun' part of English, by giving learners the opportunity for their work to be published and incentivising participation in creative writing workshops as well as other plans, such as inviting a famous poet to speak with learners at the college, integrating creative writing into every English session in starter activities and displaying poetry related to their subjects in their vocational area.

### Other Contextual Information

Our action research was part of the Education and Training Foundation's OTLA 8 Programme. It took place in the English department as well as cross-college, including the Out Centre in Liverpool. A number of the English teachers had some involvement, attending workshops and using resources from the project, and some were heavily involved in the project; running creative writing activities and reflecting on the outcomes regularly. The case studies focus on Functional Skills (FS) and GCSE learners who worked in the library in dedicated creative writing workshops held by external creative writing degree learners. This activity was designed to explore the impact on motivation. Learners in the project range from 14-16 school learners who attend for GCSE and FS English one day per week, and 16+ learners who are undertaking GCSE or FS as a resit following school. FS Levels are from Entry Level 2 to Level 1 inclusive, and these learners would not normally undertake creative writing as part of the course. The impact of these activities is also explored in the case studies.

## APPROACH

The project took several angles. The first was to use creative writing starter activities in English sessions and explore the impact on learners. This was done using a variety of methods including post-it notes, a simple two question survey, speaking with learners and poll everywhere responses. This aspect of the project helped us to gain an insight into whether creative writing would be an effective method of engagement for learners across college. The starter activities ran from the very start of the year in September and are still running now most weeks. The aim of using these starter activities was to engage learners from the start of the session by allowing them to express their creativity and see these activities as fun and engaging introductions to English lessons.

The second aspect was introducing a motivational external speaker to run workshops for both staff and learners. This was poet Dr Mike Garry, who ran two learner workshops in the library in which he spoke about the impact reading has had on his life, how it can change yours and introduced some poetry to learners. The day with this poet was a success, with over 40 learners attending the workshops and 5 members of staff at the staff session. The learners were from the animal care provision and were brought to the sessions by their animal care lecturer. The lecturer was impressed, involved and reflected after the session that it had inspired her in her creative writing passion. In the animal care provision since this day the learners have participated in animal related poetry days and are focusing on their writing skills. We collected learner feedback on this which we have included in the appendices. Learners felt positive after these sessions and we witnessed disengaged learners actually check out library books following the session as a result. The staff workshop Dr Garry ran in the afternoon was attended by 5 members of staff, from Foundation Learning, the English Department and from the Quality Department. This was also recorded to be shared with the wider college. The feedback from this session was also good, and Dr Garry spoke about finding a passion for English and sharing this with learners. He gave practical advice and tools to use, which the English team have since implemented.

The third aspect was the creative writing workshops run by University College Lancashire (UCLan) learners in the library for a six-week programme. This gave learners from FS and GCSE programmes the opportunity to work with external practitioners and to explore the possibilities creative writing can give. A total of 25 learners attended these sessions; they worked on poetry writing and really had the time to focus on their writing styles. Each week the learners worked on a prepared mini lesson/session on different aspects of creative writing, from planning to editing. This also led to the opportunity of having work published in an anthology of works about Myerscough college. This opportunity was open to both staff and learners to help create a buzz around writing at the college and was advertised as a writing competition for all to be involved.

## OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

### Teaching, Learning and Assessment

There are several impacts to consider here. The overall 'mission' of the project was to improve motivation and passion for English through using creative writing, and so to evaluate the impact of this we must consider each aspect of the project and the impact of each.

### Impact of creative writing starter activities

At the start of the year, we asked learners, as a starter activity, to write a word that comes to mind when they hear the word 'reading'. Of these words, 50% of these were negative – (please refer to

Appendix 4 for examples of the words shared). We have since done the same activity and the positive words have increased to 75%.

Discussing each activity with learners afterwards, asking them to reflect on how it made them feel and giving that space for learners to really think about the impact the starter activity had on their thought processes was impactful. This project allowed focus on this part of the lesson whereas usually it would be simply to engage learners as they arrive. It triggered the intention to really give time and reflection space to starter activities for both the teacher and the learners. After the Haiku poetry starter which uses 5-7-5 syllables in a 3 line poem for example, learners felt in some ways exposed, and it was important that we reflected on this and discussed it so that they could feel comfortable being creative in future. We have included a breakdown of the feedback from the haiku starter in the appendices.

### **Impact of poet**

Dr Mike Garry definitely left a lasting impression on both staff and learners. Learners actively checked out books from the library after the workshop and were discussing the workshop animatedly. We ran a feedback survey with one of the groups and the results from this are included in the appendices. Having an external speaker (especially one so passionate) was a real talking point for both staff and learners, and allowed thoughts to focus on English, and discussing reading and creative writing.

### **Impact of workshops**

Learners who have attended the workshops have produced poetry and written pieces of a high standard, and, when asked, have said that they have really enjoyed the sessions. All learners who attended the workshops will be entering the writing competition, as they were working on their piece whilst in the workshops. This has also created links between the English department at Myerscough and the local University Creative Writing Department, which we will continue to develop, and we will potentially run this style of project again next year. This could be an ongoing relationship, as it is supporting the degree learners with their project and is giving learners on our FS and GCSE programmes the opportunity to see writing as a potential career and to find enjoyment in writing.

### **Impact of anthology**

The writing competition has had a huge impact on the college, one of the biggest from this project, to the point that in the staff room in the Quality Department, we found out that three members of the team have been published in the past. This discussion and the 'buzz' about writing at college is such an unexpected outcome of the project- unexpected, yet, perhaps predictable. We had predicted that we may be able to get this to happen, but it is unexpected just how much conversation is circulating around it and how many people have actively been involved in the competition (not necessarily by entering it). We have been bold with our interactions and advertising of the competition and have given senior leaders at the college entry forms, encouraging them to take part. A governor of the college was given one by the Director of Teaching and Learning and has entered a piece into the competition.

As part of the project was around the use of starter activities, we created a bank of creative writing starter activities which other team members have utilised and added to. This has allowed for discussion and standardisation of teaching approaches. One of the direct participants in the project works at one of our other campuses and is someone who we at the main campus have not collaborated with very much in the past due to distance. As a result of a lot of online

learning/networking due to COVID-19 this collaboration has increased in recent years but has now increased much more due to us working on this project together.

As mentioned in the impact of Dr Mike Garry’s workshops section, an animal care lecturer who attended the workshop was intrigued and asked for support in developing their experience and confidence in using creative writing skills in their area. We were able to put her in touch with another member of staff from the same department who had been encouraging her learners to write poems about animals to express themselves. Again, this discussion and outcome would probably not have arisen if it was not for the project.

## Professional Development

Professional Standard	How our project outcomes demonstrate this standard
<p><b>6. Build positive and collaborative relationships with colleagues and learners.</b></p>	<p>We have built positive and collaborative relationships through the use of and collaboration on starter activities, with Croxteth Centre staff in particular. We have also built a new relationship between our General Education Department at Myerscough and the Creative Writing Department at UCLan, which we will continue after the project. In addition, we have built a working relationship with Dr Mike Garry, who has suggested that he would like to return and do further work with our learners; we now liaise on Twitter with different educational ideas. We feel that the time given to reflection and to focus on feelings with creative writing in terms of approach and motivation has helped learners to feel valued. It has also helped with the building of positive relationships between teachers and learners.</p>
<p><b>9. Apply theoretical understanding of effective practice in teaching, learning and assessment drawing on research and other evidence.</b></p>	<p>In this project we applied techniques from Allen (2017), including ensuring that praise is given, focusing on motivating learners and also focusing on strengths as a base. This has been applied through the creative writing starter activities and also through the creative writing workshops. The book and its contents have been discussed and shared with project participants.</p>
<p><b>13. Motivate and inspire learners to promote achievement and develop their skills to enable progression.</b></p>	<p>The rationale for the whole project was to increase the motivation of learners, and to inspire them through the use of engaging creative writing activities. As these activities have been successful we would say this Professional Standard is one of the most vital for the project and that the impact on learners has been obvious. For example, through learner participation in the competition, which shows clear engagement as this is extra-curricular, and the quality of work produced in starter activities and in workshops, which demonstrates the learners’ new skills.</p>

## Organisational Development

Working with Darren at Croxteth was a development of our communication across centres. Although in the past we have shared resources, the project allowed us to work together much more closely and develop our working relationship which we will continue after the project. It helped us to realise that work is being doubled by us not collaborating more regularly. Using Teams has become much more normal since the Covid-19 pandemic began, and this has allowed for an easier communication

between centres, which is important to continue. The bank of starter activity resources is something we will continue to develop and is an organisational change as a result of the project

Building a working relationship with UCLan has also been a positive outcome, which we will continue to use and develop. The university learners there have been thrilled with the opportunity to develop their practice and they had a positive impact on learners at our college. Discussions have arisen about future collaboration which we will follow up on.

Working with the animal care provision at Preston campus has also been a development, in which the teachers there have been promoting English and creative writing with their learners, particularly after the Mike Garry session in which they felt enthused into previous passions with writing and creativity and they said it reminded them of their own personal love of reading, which they wanted to share with their learners.

## LEARNING FROM THIS PROJECT

If we were to complete this project again, we would be inclined to focus more heavily on just one element. As we are so passionate about creative writing and English, we found it a bit too easy to get carried away into the several strands of the project. Our intention was to create a buzz about creative writing in the College, which we do feel we achieved, but we do think there were quite a lot of activities involved and so reflection for each has not been as thorough as it would have been if there was one key focus. We have chosen to focus our reflection mainly on the starter activities and the creative writing workshops, for which we completed case studies and clear reflection activities, but, for example, when considering the workshop with Dr Mike Garry, we could have done a lot more reflection and consideration of impact of this if we had fewer activities to focus our attention on.

We would have also been able to advertise the day with Mike Garry more thoroughly, while it was successful in some respects (mainly with learners) it was not very well attended by staff, and this could have been organised on a CPD day, so that more people could have attended. We were restricted by the speaker's calendar here too, of course.

The aspect we feel has been the most successful is the creative writing workshops and the writing competition, because this has had the greatest reach in terms of participants. We have been able to advertise this through our marketing department and it has been shared with all colleagues across all sites through our newsletter.

We feel with fewer activities, this project would be easier to replicate across other organisations and the key focus would be to run a competition with writing as the central aspect, and to develop a bank of starter activities based on creative writing and focus on the impact and reflections from learners in terms of motivation and engagement in activities.

## REFERENCES

Allan, D., (2017). *Teaching English and maths in FE: what works for vocational learners?* Los Angeles: Learning Matters.



# APPENDICES

## Appendix 1: The Project Team

Project Role	Name	Job Role	Contact
Project Lead	Rachel Newton	TLC and GCSE/FS English Lecturer	<a href="mailto:rnewton@myerscough.ac.uk">rnewton@myerscough.ac.uk</a>
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## Appendix 2: Learner Case Studies

### Case study 1 – FS learner- Schools 14-16

This case study looks at the impact the creative writing starter activities had on a disengaged learner, through the reflection of verbal interactions and work produced by the learner. The learner was aware that they were taking part in an action research project and that the reflections could be included in any write up.

In the first session, we asked learners to respond to a poll everywhere to write 3 words they associated with the word “writing”. We had a mixed response with some focusing on what writing consists of, but popular responses included “long” “effort” and “creative”. Asking this learner in particular what their response was, they said they had responded “poo” (only one word submitted).

After this session, each starter activity was a creative writing element, one of which was the haiku activity. This learner attempted the haiku and wrote one which fitted with the rules.

When asked to reflect on how this made them feel, the learner responded “normal, they felt nothing”. This is slightly more positive than the first response.

As the sessions went on, and we continued to run more creative writing starters, e.g., song lyrics as a story, adjectives to describe, the learner was slightly more engaged.

Due to the opportunity to reflect on each activity with the learners, we did get to see what was having an impact and what wasn't. This learner in particular admitted that they found Functional Skills to be boring, and that they prefer the creative writing elements and wished they could do GCSE. The conversation arose around FS being a stepping stone, and with encouragement and determination they would be able to attempt the GCSE in the next academic year. The learner now wishes to complete Level 1 as well as Entry Level 3 and is striving towards GCSE. The lack of engagement, they say, was due to FS being so “functional” and that they prefer to be creative. We had assumed that this learner disliked all aspects of English and this would have continued had we not run the project and the starter activities.

### Case study 2: FS Learner- FE 16+

This learner was invited to the library to participate in the creative writing workshops with the UCLan degree learners. The learner was asked if they would like to participate and they agreed.

They initially had no confidence in speaking, putting any ideas forwards, even when it came down to creating a character. They wouldn't verbalise whether they wanted to do a person or an animal. Initially when they were writing things down it was 1 or 2 words however the learner progressed to having more discussions and extended them through 5 senses and physical descriptions. They did this verbally rather than in writing at first to build confidence. Once they had decided on the characteristics of a character, they started writing them down and decided whether it would fit in a poem or a story. They decided on a story, so picked the setting of the cattery, from a cat's perspective- they are an animal care learner. The idea that it was contextualised to area made them feel more comfortable and confident.

They have now produced their first draft and this is ready to be edited. This learner is now much more confident, and more comfortable, and really contributes to discussions, doesn't need

prompting with name now to join in with discussions. They are actively involved in the sessions.

They were so enthusiastic with last piece one of teachers came to collect it so that they could continue to work on it outside of the sessions.

Having the opportunity to work on creative writing (which is a GCSE skill rather than Functional Skills) has really impacted this learner's confidence and motivation for English.

### Appendix 3: Feedback From One of the Starter Activities (Haiku Writing)

This shows the reflections of learners based on one of the starter activities we ran in class. It is a good mix of FS and GCSE learners and shows the impact of the activity. Running this reflection allowed us to focus on the positives and also to see how to approach learners who felt negatively about this.

	How activity made them feel	Why it made them feel this way	What other tasks they would like to do
<b>GCSE GROUP</b>	Okay- struggled but then got it		Reading with music on in background
	Bored	hard and not fun	big free writes
	Bored	because I don't like English	films
	this lesson wasn't as boring as the rest	more interesting	
	This was a joyful activity and was not boring	We were able to help each other and you made it fun	I would like to do mystery lessons
	I really enjoyed it	fun to show your emotions	Writing stories
	it was alright	because it was good	
	safe	it has set rules that are clear to follow	creative writing
	a bit anxious but if i keep practicing I will feel more confident	If i get it wrong the first try	
	felt ashamed of what we are doing to animal habitats	The beach picture- so disrespectful	Team work
	relaxed, focused, calm, satisfied	Thinking about every word and changing them around, kept me in thought. When I got it correct it felt very satisfying	More creative writing- enjoyable
	sad	the theme of the poem- plastic	not writing
<b>LOWER LEVEL GROUP</b>	bored	because its boring	none
	bit bored	dont like poems	dunno
	bored to death	i hate poems	nothing
	normal	nothing	writing
	alright	just because	
	normal	cus	not sure
	confused	sort of hard	
	pretty good	fun activity	building
	very good	it was fun	more like this
	good		not much
	good	easy fun and new	more like this
	good easy	i like creative writing	more creative writing
	good easy	learnt something new	
	Okay/good	I dont know	Reading analysis

## Appendix 4: Screenshot of Initial Feelings About Writing

Shows learners' initial feelings about writing and what we could work with and try to improve as a basis and starting point for the project. We created this using Poll Everywhere and learners were able to contribute using their mobile devices.

The screenshot displays a web browser window with the URL [https://www.pollerywhere.com/free\\_text\\_polls/PlI9r6h1YPKG1p570eh5H](https://www.pollerywhere.com/free_text_polls/PlI9r6h1YPKG1p570eh5H). The page title is "Write 3 words that you associate with the word 'WRITING'". The poll is active, and the word cloud contains the following words: imagination, adjective, poo, storyline, publication, alliteration, imaginative, skinny, paragraphs, lines, long, pen, expressive, arm, effort, creative, book, quote, numb, words, hagiographa, not-fun, makes, interesting, punctuation, shaking, time-consuming, paper, boring. The interface includes a navigation bar with "Share", "Visual settings", "Activate", and "Present" buttons. A sidebar on the right shows configuration options: "1. Configure", "2. Test", "3. Send", "How people can respond", "Audience restriction & identity", "Response settings", and "Moderation". A notification box at the bottom right says "Review runs and export screenshots and other data on your new response history page." with a "Got it" button. The bottom of the screen shows a Windows taskbar with the search bar and system tray.

Figure 1. Learners share their feelings about writing.

## Appendix 5: Feedback From M Garry Sessions.

These responses are a random selection focusing on two questions asked:

1. What was your one key takeaway from the session?	2. Write down one word to describe the session
A different look into poetry	Engaging
How one situation can change somebody's life	Touching
How he grew up and what life was like for him	Passionate
Love	Energetic
Stay alive, we are loved.	Interesting

We have used quotations from these in the marketing announcements we have put out on social media.

## Appendix 6: Participants and Stakeholders

No of learners?	<b>30</b>	No of staff?	<b>18</b>
No of organisations?	<b>1</b>	No of employers/ stakeholders?	<b>1</b>

## Appendix 7: Research/ Evaluation Approach

<b>Participant/observer</b> (e.g. practitioner reflective accounts, logs)	<b>X</b>	<b>Interview/survey</b> (e.g. polls, questionnaires, learner interviews)	<b>X</b>
<b>Observation of practice</b> (in person, video, observation notes)	<b>X</b>	<b>Document analysis</b> (e.g. learner work, session plans, annotated resources, policies)	
<b>Custom test/assessment</b> (of knowledge, skill, attitude, participation) for your 'intervention'		<b>High-stakes learner assessment</b> (e.g. A Level results, End Point Assessment, BTECs)	
<b>Before/after assessment</b> (e.g. measures of progress or change in attainment, participation)		<b>Comparative trial</b> (e.g. comparing participants' outcomes against a 'control' group)	
<b>Other</b> (specify):	Action Research.		

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