ACTING AND INTERACTING : *creating an 'extended family' classroom culture through peer and cross-age learning*

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Abstract

This study investigates the benefits of a three-tier system of peer and cross-age learning in a Level 3 Acting course at a further education college. First and second year students and graduate volunteers interact to create an 'extended family' classroom culture where reciprocal peer and cross-age teaching, learning and feedback is at the heart of daily practice. Much published research investigating the advantages of peer learning tends to focus on isolated assessments in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects and English, in schools or higher education institutions. What distinguishes this study is that the learning is peer and cross-age, takes place in a vocational creative subject area in further education and, crucially, is a classroom culture that is assimilated daily, handed down with each student generation. Through class observations, group discussions, student stories and responses to study questions, three key benefits of this three-tier learning system emerged: improved student *confidence*, *emotional resilience* and *critical thinking skills*. The study concludes that the 'extended family' ethos creates a community of learning where peer and cross-age teaching, learning and feedback positively impact the students' emotional, social and academic development. There is wider potential for disseminating this classroom culture to other curriculum areas.

Key Words: Peer learning; cross-age; peer teaching; peer assessment; collaborative learning; community of learning

Introduction

There is no lack of evidence on the benefits of peer learning. Piagetian and Vygotskian cognitive models of peer learning are the cornerstones of much debate on children's educational needs. In 1984, William Damon, recognising the motivational and cognitive benefits of peer education, referred to it as 'the untapped potential'. However, the focus is often on schools and higher education (HE) institutions, with research studies investigating isolated one-off interventions or assessments in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects and English. The purpose of this study was to investigate the educational benefits of an established three-tier system of peer and cross-age learning in a vocational Level 3 Acting course at a further education (FE) college. This is a class model that I, as Course Leader, have created over a number of years: a community of learning where first year acting students, second year acting students and graduate volunteers interact to create an 'extended family' classroom culture. Peer and cross-age reciprocal teaching, learning and feedback is at the heart of daily practice and is now so firmly entrenched as a learning model that the ethos is handed down each year without the need for detailed explanations. The classroom culture is disciplined, democratic and supportive. Class sizes vary from year to year but, during the academic year of this study, classes were small - six first year students, eight second year students and five graduate volunteers. The model has its challenges from time to time, such as the occasional student who is happy to give feedback but actively resists receiving it or, in the early years, graduate volunteers who found it difficult to recalibrate their relationship with students who had been their friends in class. However, in my opinion, the developmental benefits that this 'extended family' brings to the students, especially in an age where an extended family model is not the societal norm, far outweigh any isolated problems that arise. Data was collected in the form of class observations, videos, group discussions, student stories and responses to the research study questions. Several key findings emerged:

- *Confidence:* watching older peers take risks inspired students to work harder and push themselves outside their comfort zone – being willing to take a risk was a key component of their increased confidence.
- *Emotional Resilience:* seeing older peers exchange honest feedback on a daily basis enabled students to progress from taking feedback as negative criticism to embracing it positively as a powerful learning tool.

- *Critical thinking skills:* giving and receiving feedback developed students' higher level cognitive skills and deepened subject knowledge which was then applied to their own learning. This in turn had a positive effect on their final grades.

Dissemination of the research findings has already begun (Appendix 4) and plans have been put in place for this peer and cross-age learning model to be implemented in other departments of the college. There is wider potential for establishing this classroom culture in other colleges.

(See Appendix 5 – Impact Grid)

Case study (Part A): Inspiration - the story behind the research

It all started in the autumn of 2013 when I invited a student named Hermione, who had just graduated from the two-year Level 3 Acting course I run at a further education college, to return and assist me in class as a volunteer assistant teacher. She had auditioned for a number of drama schools during her second year but had not been successful in gaining a place at her top choices. I felt strongly that coming back to assist me in class would be hugely beneficial to her and the students. Hermione was a very talented, dedicated and hard-working student, who came up with unusual and interesting choices as an actor. I knew there was something that set her apart from the very beginning when, in a storytelling exercise in her first year, she deliberately used a style of narrative that felt quite old-fashioned and whimsical in style but suited her story perfectly. She was happy to follow her creative instincts without censorship. She read plays avidly, went to the theatre as much as she could and was passionate about the craft of acting.

It was interesting to watch how Hermione approached her new role – like an apprentice. She came to College every single day, sat in class and watched me with the students. Slowly I began to ask her to contribute feedback to the students. Her feedback was pertinent, insightful and thoughtful. I started including her more and more in the structure of each lesson as her confidence and voice grew. The more she contributed, the more she found her voice as a teacher and mentor to the students. As the year progressed, she was able to teach groups of students on her own. She was imaginative in her approach to exercises and the students were inspired by her guidance.

Having an ex-student who had just graduated from the very course they were on, gave the students a sense of comfort and security. Here was someone who could empathise with their challenges and struggles because she had only just recently been through exactly the same challenges and struggles. To the student who was terrified of jumping up to join an improvisation exercise, she was able to say, 'I felt exactly the same way! I was absolutely terrified at the beginning!" Hermione went on to explain to them that they didn't need to feel terrified, that it was just another exercise that was there to help them learn: to learn to be in the moment, not to plan, to accept what was being offered to them by the other actors, to listen to the other actors. Hearing this from someone who seemed so confident and knowledgeable and yet admitted and shared their fears gave the students a sense of hope and courage to have a go. In addition, getting honest feedback from Hermione helped the students become more pragmatic in their response to feedback. They understood that she was there to help them improve, not to criticise them. She had faced the same setbacks and insecurities, so her feedback helped them become more emotionally resilient. They started to ask for more feedback.

Case study (Part A): Inspiration - the story behind the research (cont)

From Hermione' point of view, teaching the students helped her own development, socially, emotionally and artistically. Her confidence grew, not only in herself as a young adult with a voice that had every right to be listened to, but also as an actor. Watching the students gave her the opportunity to identify her own strengths and limitations as a performer. She was able to see how she needed to apply the advice she gave to the students to her own practice. Explaining the craft of acting to them and working out what feedback each student needed to further their learning journeys deepened her own understanding of the craft.

Having Hermione as a volunteer in class was a resounding success for both her and the students. The year she volunteered, she auditioned for drama schools once again and was offered a place at every single one of her top choices. Of the second year cohort who had had her as a volunteer, every single student who applied to higher education institutions was offered a place at drama school or university. With Hermione, I had started what was to become the foundation of my teaching: cross-age peer learning, teaching and feedback. The 'extended family' was born.

Why did I embark on this research?

The Level 3 Acting course I run maintains high standards with consistently high attendance, success and achievement rates. Students progress to respected universities and drama schools and graduate with greatly improved confidence and social skills. So, the first question that brought me to this study was – why does this three-tier system peer and cross-age learning work? Is it unique or has it been done before? If it has, why isn't it more prevalent and visible within the teaching landscape, particularly in FE?

Akin to Darwin's theory of natural selection, I have found that teaching practice and methodology evolves just as mysteriously and just as rationally. Its advancement is fuelled by the same evolutionary dichotomy that manages to safe-keep inherited strengths but also enables the necessary modifications that progress requires. Tradition and progress walk hand in hand. I started and maintained the tradition of graduate volunteers assisting me in class because I saw the benefits first-hand. Moving forward, I started to merge first and second year classes as I could see how valuable this communal way of learning was to the students' developmental journey: academically, artistically, socially and emotionally. What I wanted to discover, however, was a *coherent rationale* behind the evolution of my teaching method.

My teaching practice had evolved organically but in order to maintain it as a model for future practice, I wanted to know more about its strengths and weaknesses so that I could refine it even further, but refine it based on *informed research*.

> Dewey emphasized again and again that the one and only purpose of educational inquiry is to make the actions of the educator more intelligent: "The sources of educational science," Dewey wrote, "are any portions of ascertained knowledge that enter into the heart, head and hands of educators, and which, by entering in, render the performance of the educational function more enlightened, more humane, more truly educational than it was before" (1929b, 39).
> (Biesta & Burbules, 2003, p.79)

Ethical considerations

I committed to conducting this research in a responsible, ethical and transparent manner that reflected the guidelines stipulated in BERA's 2018 (4th Edition) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research, as well as the relevant institution's own ethical guidelines and safeguarding procedures. This study is a reflective investigation of my own practice with the primary aim of enhancing the students' learning experience. I committed to implementing my full duty of care to all the students, prioritising their health, safety and welfare at all times. The students were made aware of the nature and purpose of the research study from the beginning and were fully involved throughout. Informed voluntary consent was obtained through an informed consent form (Appendix 1) which the students or their parents (if they were under 18 years old) signed. The privacy of both students and institution have been respected, with confidentiality and anonymity afforded to all. The students either chose their own pseudonyms or were assigned one. Systematic, rigorous and transparent interpretation of the research finding was ensured by involving the students fully in the research process, so that any interpretation of the findings, which could be potentially subjective and personal, was discussed.

Literature review

My research study can be viewed as a back-to-front experiment. The study is not testing an established hypothesis or trying to demonstrate a known fact. I have already made a discovery: this three-tier system of peer and cross-age learning works. Knowing the results of my experiment, I wanted to illuminate them by investigating my method of discovery. As a result, my approach to the literature review has been to look for key themes that would support and validate my discovery.

The available literature on peer learning looms like vast expanse of mist, clouding the dawn of my literary review's horizon. There are numerous studies that promote peer learning, whose academic ideas and concepts support each other and validate my discoveries and teaching methodology. However, I say 'mist' because there is so much overlap and I am bewildered as to why the findings have not been disseminated more widely in educational institutions. The title of Damon's (1984) paper, which makes a comprehensive case for the wider use of peer learning in the educational landscape, is "Peer Education: The Untapped Potential". Perhaps my own dissemination strategy will provide some answers as to why this may still be the case.

Damon (1984) talks of peer *education,* differentiating between peer *tutoring* and peer *collaboration.* Topping (1998) encourages teachers to use Peer *Assisted Learning* (PAL) which encompasses "peer *tutoring*, peer *modeling*, peer *education*, peer *counseling*, peer *monitoring*, and peer *assessment*." Topping's (1998) reasoning aligns with my own beliefs and findings, namely that peer learning or PAL "complements and supplements (but never replaces) professional teaching--capitalizing on the unique qualities and richness of peer interaction and helping students become empowered democratically to take more responsibility for their own learning."

Damon's (1984) peer *tutoring* is a one-to-one pairing, sustained over time with the tutor two to three years older than the tutee, whereas peer *collaboration* is undertaken in groups of two to four children while the subject is mastered, then the groups reform. This is quite different to my 3-tier 'extended family' model, where peer interaction is not prescribed by one or more rigid paradigms of learning. First years, second years and graduates interact in many ways, through class, rehearsal, as 'buddies' and in group work that is more fluid by its nature. The other key difference is that Damon's (1984) peer learning takes place in a school, like so many other studies on the topic. Perhaps that is why the arrangements seem relatively inflexible. In many ways that sums up the major difference between many schools and colleges: fixed timetables for dependent children versus a flexible environment for independent young adults. Relationships, whether one-to-one or group, seem to be allocated and fixed over a certain period of time. The one-to-one pairing is not dissimilar to the 'buddy' system I have implemented, but even that is more flexible in that there can be more than one 'buddy' and buddies can move from student to student.

Topping (1996) summarises three methods of peer tutoring that have proven to be effective, though further research is needed so they can be more widely disseminated: *cross-year small-group tutoring* (one postgraduate or higher level undergraduate helping a group of lower undergraduates); *same-year dyadic reciprocal tutoring; same-year dyadic fixed-role tutoring* and *peer assisted writing*. These methods have predominantly been trialled in university settings, although they could correlate to the graduate volunteers and buddy system in my classes. However, once again I feel the studies Topping (1996) summarises are more fixed, with the aim of passing individual assessments as opposed to the 'extended family' which, I feel, is the important component in the acting students' *academic, artistic, social and emotional development.*

There are few studies reported studying peer learning and its impact on critical thinking skills in FE colleges. However, one such study was reported by Anderson et al. (2001) where students in Social Care and Health Care, from 3 different FE colleges, were given 10 sessions aiming to teach evidence-based justification for the purpose of peer-based critiquing each others' proposed projects. The sessions were taught by research scientists. The intervention was carried out in FE colleges which has some relevance to my study. To some extent peer-based critiquing can be compared to the acting students exchanging reciprocal feedback to each other and improving their critical thinking skills. Though Anderson et al. (2001) reports a limited single research study where teaching was by outside researchers, it is a two year Level III [sic] course where the development of a peer and cross-age learning culture could be attempted. In fact, in Anderson et al. (2001), as the sessions proceeded, the justification of arguments improved, particularly in written work, emphasising the importance of the time element in implementing the acquirement of the cognitive skills. While changing a classroom culture takes years, the Anderson et al. (2001) report hints it may be possible through the consistent use of peer feedback.

Sifting through the plethora of research studies on peer learning, it is clear that the majority of studies have focused on schools and HE. Many of the HE studies, I feel, have less relevance to my study because they often relate to isolated interventions for the purpose of improving student assessments just as the school studies deal with the mastery of specific subjects. What differentiates my research study is that the peer and cross-age learning takes place in an *established three-tier classroom culture* with an *'extended family' ethos that is handed down* with each student generation. However, I feel more comparisons can be made

from Damon's (1984) findings, such as the children's enhanced self-esteem and how peer interaction fosters the discovery of learning, enabling children's personal growth by promoting empathy towards others and providing them with constructive social experiences. These findings mirror the three key themes that emerged during my research study, namely students' improved, *confidence, emotional resilience and critical thinking skills.*

As to why peer learning is still 'the untapped potential' as Damon (1984) believed or perhaps, simply a hidden resource, is probably as Topping (1996) surmises because the dissemination stage of the research studies is often missing. I am left with the impression that peer learning is used, but in isolated cases and settings. More research, certainly in FE, is needed and more dissemination of that research.

Research methods

I had already identified three key themes early on the research study: *students' improved confidence, emotional resilience and critical thinking skills.* My quest was to find out if they were indeed the key areas of student development that peer and cross-age learning actively improves. I ensured the students

> "One way to summarize Dewey's theory of action is to say that it amounts to ***a theory*** of ***experimental learning…..***
>
> …it is possible to transform habits into ***intelligent*** habits, and action into ***intelligent*** action. At one level, we might say this is the purpose of all inquiry and research, including educational research."
>
> Biesta & Burbules (2003), p.38

were part of open discussions about the research and the findings throughout the study so that their input and it was their experiences driving the discoveries and not my preconceived ideas of what the key themes were. The interpretation of experience will always contain an element of subjectivity, but I hoped that the recurrence of certain themes would lend authenticity to the interpretation.

My initial qualitative research methods took the form of narrative inquiry, focusing on individual and collective experiences and identifying themes in the students' stories (see Appendix 2). Why did these themes arise? How did they manifest themselves in the students' learning journeys? Refining the questions even further, at what specific point in their educational development did these occurrences or experiences *(increased confidence, emotional resilience, higher cognitive thinking skills)* illuminated by the common themes

occur? If I could identify the conditions required for these experiences or phenomena, I would be able to have a deeper understanding of the rationale behind my teaching methodology.

> Phenomenology as research method includes the following methodical features:
> a. Phenomenological research begins with wonder at what gives itself and how something gives itself.
> b. A phenomenological question explores what is given in moments of prereflective, prepredicative, or lived experience.
> c. Phenomenology aims to describe the exclusively singular aspects (identity/essence/otherness) of a phenomenon or event….

> Van Manen, M. (2014),
> drawn from www.maxvanmanen.com/files/2014/07/SAGE-Phenomenology.pdf
> [accessed 1 September 2019]

Phenomenology was a necessary part of my research methodology as, once I had illuminated common themes within the data collection, I wanted to try to identify *specific moments or phenomena* that were the *catalyst for the experiences* highlighted in those common themes. Lester (1999) explains, "The purpose of the phenomenological approach is to illuminate the specific, to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors in a situation." Van Manen (2007) maintains that "a phenomenology of practice aims to open up possibilities for creating formative relations between being and acting, between who we are and how we act, between thoughtfulness and tact." I was looking, in a similar vein to van Manen's description, for a connection between the students' experiences that I knew had happened, the students' experiences that I could see were happening and the action required to make them happen again.

Data collection and analysis (See Appendix 3 – Student stories)

The sheer volume of data that I have collected over the course of this study has been both exciting and daunting for me as a research practitioner. I am excited to know that findings can be drawn from such extensive sources of information but somewhat disheartened that I will not be able to use all the data I have collated, for this study. In order to precis the findings, I have a chosen a handful of students whose work I have highlighted or quoted (see text boxes and Appendix 3, p.23 – Student stories). My reasoning behind the choices was to find stories that expressed and articulated thought and experience clearly for the purpose of this report. This

could potentially lead to a bias, in that the students who can express themselves clearly have already reached a salient point in their developmental journey, but I have ensured the published student stories were sourced from a mix of ages and capabilities.

Data was collected in the form of student stories (see Appendix 3) drawn from:

- class observations
- rehearsal and production
- group discussions student responses to research study questions (see Appendix 2)
- documents
    - students' reflective logbooks
    - peer feedback on online document shared with all relevant participants

The common themes identified are:

1. themes drawn from my *teaching practice*, and
2. themes highlighted by *student development*

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1. TEACHING METHODS

In a safe environment with a flexible structure:

- **BUDDY SYSTEM**, PEER AND CROSS-AGE
- **OBSERVATION,** PEER AND CROSS-AGE
- **FEEDBACK,** PEER AND CROSS-AGE
    - In class and rehearsal
    - Reciprocal target setting
    - Online shared document
- **GRADUATE VOLUNTEERS**

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2. STUDENTS' DEVELOPMENT

- CONFIDENCE
- EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE
- CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS
- COURAGE TO TAKE RISKS

1. Teaching methods

Establishing a safe environment and flexible structure

From the study, it emerged that the creation and maintenance of a *safe, supportive and non-judgemental space* is a vital component in the 'extended family' classroom culture. Coming from school, where many students have been bullied or judged for their choices, the 'safe space' allows them to take risks and make the most of the powerful learning and developmental experience that peer and cross-age interaction brings. In addition, it seems a flexible structure helps the students let go of anxiety brought on by the need to control

> *"While I haven't really had issues with judging myself or others, the welcoming and kind attitude the second years have was the perfect thing to promote that kind of attitude to us as first years. An attitude that is most conducive to our development as actors."*
> **Matthew,**
> **first year Level 3 Acting student**

their experiences or performances. The safe space allows *confidence* to emerge within the students. There is an obvious link here to Maslow's (1962) hierarchy of needs theory that has played an important role in many current classroom set-ups. A student needs to feel safe and supported before they can begin to let go, not care and believe in their own potential.

> *"Being on this course and constantly interacting with new people allows me to grow in confidence even in the first day, as I was a very shy person before I came on this course and I would hate having conversations with other people that weren't my friends. But due to the classes being so integrated in the first few months really allowed me to find myself and who I am as a person. From a young age I always loved colour and at school I was bullied for it and it made me silent and lost who I am, but coming on this course and mixing with so many different people really allowed me to find myself and my love for so many things in my childhood that I forgot about, such as my love for colour and expressing myself through that. It has also given me the confidence to talk to so many new people and constantly be hungry to learn new things which is not how I was in first year. This also allowed me to stop judging myself as I used to wear makeup to feel comfortable with who I am but coming here allowed me to stop wearing makeup and be comfortable with who I am, as well being able to stop judging others for being who they want to be."*
> **Eloise, second year student**

- **Buddy system, peer and cross-age**

A peer 'buddy' gives the students one-to-one support. Older buddies have often had the same challenges themselves in their first year and can identify how to address the challenge. Knowing their buddy has faced the same obstacles gives students *confidence* in their own ability to address and overcome these obstacles. Examples of buddies are:

- o Eye contact buddy

- o Posture buddy

- o Confidence buddy

- o Risk-taking buddy

- o Maths buddy

- o English buddy

- o Assignment buddy

- o Tension buddy (refers to tension in hands, face, shoulders etc. when performing)

- o Slow-down-your-speech buddy

- o pronounce-your-'th's-as-'th'- and-not-'f's buddy

- o put-yourself-first-and-stop-taking-everyone-else's-problems-on buddy

> *'We're going to have to up our game. That was amazing.'*
> **Second years inspired by first year show**

> *Graduate Lance spoke at the College teaching conference about having had 'posture buddies' in his first year, many 'posture buddies'. An extremely tall young man who had been told, repeatedly, at school to crouch down in productions so as not to overshadow everyone else, he would stoop to speak to others and try to minimise his powerful presence. I gave him notes throughout his time at College, to own his space, to be proud of his height and his inner power, to make full use of his physical frame, his 'cookie-cutter shape' as I refer to it. 'Let your own individual cookie-cutter shape fill every space you walk through! You have as much right to be there as everyone else!', I tell the students. However, it was when an older peer came up to him and said - 'I can help you with that. I'll be your posture buddy.' – that my advice started to make more sense to him. For the buddy system means students have buddies reminding them of what they need to work on all the time, in class, out of class, at lunch, waiting for the bus, in rehearsals, during shows and so on. It paid off and today Lance ensures he takes full advantage of his tall genes.*

- **Peer and cross-age observation**

> *"It's time for us to teach the first years now – to show them what our second years did for us."*
> **Liz, second year student**

I started introducing cross-age interaction by ensuring each cohort came to see each other's shows, rehearsals, class assessments, presentations, duologues, monologues and so on. I could see how much inspiration first years took from watching, for example, the second year actors' Shakespearean duologues and monologues. Knowing they would be tackling

> *To help me, Lance [graduate volunteer] performed the piece in order to give me inspiration. He was so incredibly free with everything he was doing, he wasn't afraid of holding back which led to some hilarious physical comedy and such positive and brightening energy that I had never even grazed when performing it myself. Despite feeling that I should have felt intimidated by this, I didn't. It only led to me feeling inspired and motivated to bring the character alive and embrace the weirdness that the character has."*
> **Steve, second year student**

complex text in their second year gave the first year students the motivation to watch the scenes with a curious and analytical eye.

What has emerged from the research findings is that peer and cross-age observation gives students the *courage to take risks*, such an pivotal moment in discovering the power and knowledge and instincts they already have within themselves.   In particular, watching an older peer take a risk, encourages the students to do the same.

> *"You are inspired by others because of what you see in them, that you know you have in yourself. They show you a side to them that you know you have in yourself."*
> **Lance, graduate volunteer**

> *"Being in a class with first years and graduate volunteers has helped me take more risks with the characters I have played in shows."*
> **Jenny, second year student**
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> *When I was in '---------' [Christmas Show], Liz [second year student] and Lance [graduate volunteer] really inspired me by how much they threw themselves into their characters and how invested they were into them. It's gave me inspiration to fully invest myself into things from then on."*
> **Delilah, first year student**

> *"I found that I have now more courage to contribute to class when I was helping to give feedback to the first years when they had just performed their [children's theatre] performances. I gave them points on how they can improve ahead of when they went to perform in the school in front of the [primary school] children. I felt that I was inspired by other members of the class to give feedback to help them improve as I know what it was like when I was in the first year being told to work on my projection so that the children could hear what I was saying."*
> **Jenny, second year student**

> *'Having a graduate demonstrate or perform something, is less intimidating than your tutor doing it, because it seems more attainable. You look at them and think that that could be me in a few years, whereas your tutor's place of knowledge and performance skills can seem far out of reach'*
> **Matthew, first year student**

- **Peer and cross-age feedback**

Watching the second years give honest, often quite eye-wateringly honest, feedback to each other, allows the first years to recognise the process as a vital part of their development as actors. They bring that process to their own peer interactions and allow themselves to be more open to giving and receiving incisive feedback. This helps build their *emotional resilience* and they start to actively seek out feedback from their peers, older and younger. In line with Piaget's (1932/1965, as cited in Damon, 1984) belief that cognitive conflict is a 'catalyst for change', peer feedback motivates the acting students to reconsider their prior knowledge and assumptions and create new conceptions that align with the feedback they are getting from their peers.

In tutorials, cross-age peers set each other SMART (specific, measured, achievable, realistic, time-bound) targets. According to Damon (1984) the Vygotskian tradition (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978), advocates that children are 'introduced to new patterns of thought when they engage in dialogues with peers'.

> *"When we watched our film and tv scene, I was very disappointed in my own performance. I could see that I wasn't really listening to what the other actors were saying, which is weird since I've been giving [sic] it as advice for so long. Opal [second year student] described it as if I was reading their lines in my head (something her and a fair few other 2nd years could relate to at some point - something I found very encouraging, as they have clearly made progress since that point, inspiring me to not be held back by things I do wrong and to always work, making progress as a result)."*
>
> **Matthew,**
> **first year student**

A *new strategy* I employed during the study was asking students to give each other feedback on a shared online document. They offered each other constructive criticism as well as encouragement by praising achievements.

> *"During the show, I was inspired by Greg [graduate] and Charlie [graduate] because they kept going when they forgot lines and Greg was only in few rehearsals and still went for it and when their voices went they just kept on going. Also Opal [second year student] when she stayed still for such a long time even struggling with ADHD. I think it's very inspirational because I couldn't stay still in the Christmas show."*
> **Arthur, first year student**

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> ***Examples of reciprocal feedback notes from shared online feedback document***
>   - *Takes criticism so well and takes it on the chin and works on it.*
>   - *Also trust your instincts on stage. You kept comforting Greg on stage so you were trusting your instincts.*
>   - *Impressed how you worked on your physicality. Kept pushing further in each rehearsal.*
>   - *You have a good natural instinct at finding something. You don't trust what you have inside most of the time. Whatever the natural instinct is - trust it !*
>   - *Can see how physically free you have become. Very stiff at first but now have opened up so much!!!!*
>   - *Went for it in this show. Charlie[graduate] is Steve's [second year student]inspiration because they had so many convos [conversations] about allowing.*

Students quickly learn to value and embrace peer feedback as a powerful learning tool and it moves them into a higher level of cognitive thinking so that their own critical thinking skills improve, either when they are analysing feedback that is given to them or formulating feedback to give to others. This aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development concept where a student's potential for growth is facilitated by collaboration with a more 'capable' peer. I would, however, argue that in the classroom culture I have established, the notion of more 'capable' is not as relevant as it is in a school setting with younger children. It does not seem to be only a peer with a higher skill set that can further their fellow students' development but, rather, a peer that demonstrates something remarkable in a class or show - an achievable aspiration. In fact, from these research findings, the catalyst for student growth appears to be *peer inspiration*, peer and cross-age. This is my 'Surprise!' moment: that peer inspiration could actually be the most important key to creating a rationale for my peer and cross-age learning methodology.

> *"Critical thinking is being able to analyse your experiences and willing to apply that to your learning, rather than expecting to passively learn everything you need."*
> **Matthew, first year student**

- **Graduate Volunteers**

Every year, I have graduate volunteers assisting me in class, sitting on assessment audition panels or running workshops, such as 'self-tapes' (the current industry audition expectation where an actor videos themselves and submits it electronically). Having graduates, who have

first-hand experience of drama schools and the performing arts industry, share their knowledge has been a very important part of the 'extended family' classroom culture. The students soak up the information in a way that is very reminiscent of a younger sibling listening intently to the adventures of and advice given by an older sibling returning to the family home after years away.

Case study (Part B): Inspiration - the story behind the research

Inviting graduates to appear in College shows provides a valuable learning opportunity for the students. As a prime example, in the summer of 2018, a second year student was unable to continue performing in our site-specific, outdoor production of a play set in the southern hemisphere. For our production, Australia was a nearby field, open to the scorching sunshine the UK enjoyed that year, with three resident horses adding to the ambience. At the very last minute, I had to draft in graduates to take over the student's two roles, with what was essentially no notice. No graduate was free for every performance, so three different graduates covered each of the three shows. It was quite an extraordinary achievement. Each graduate turned up a few hours before the show, were given the script, a brief walk-through of their scenes and they were off, playing two different, very complex characters: one a ferocious, bitter, egomaniac and the other a despised, sensitive, haunted loner. All the graduates did a marvellous job of telling the story truthfully and with great intent. The phrase, 'being in the moment', has never seemed more apt. For the acting students in the play, what had initially seemed a disaster turned into one of the most useful exercises in their College learning journey. During the three performances, they had to interact and play scenes with two characters who were being interpreted in very different ways by three very different graduate actors. Not only were the students being given the opportunity to act with graduates who were raising the bar in many ways but they were also having to hone their craft in each moment, maintaining sustained spontaneity and truth in very unfamiliar territory.

  Since then graduates have appeared in most College productions. The acting students have often spoken about how the graduates' presence inspires them to take risks and push their boundaries in numerous ways. Acting with the graduates on stage brings a different dynamic to the acting students' performances, inspiring and compelling them to raise their game and delve deep into their actors' emotional tool-kit. The graduates bring a passion and vulnerability to their performances that may have seemed frightening to them when they were students themselves. Watching the graduates abandon themselves to story and character without fear or self-critique allows the acting students to do the same. It is as if the acting students feel they have finally been given permission to let go.

Case study (Part B): Inspiration - the story behind the research (cont)

Hermione inspired the culture of graduate volunteers which, in turn, was the inspiration for my merging first and second year classes and laying the foundation for today's class culture of a three-tier 'extended family' learning environment. The graduate volunteers' continued contribution is essential to maintaining the class 'community' ethos and the safe, supported environment where students find courage to take risks. Their involvement is a fundamental part of my teaching practice. They say it takes a village to raise a child. The graduate volunteers are the elders of our village.

Recommendations and conclusion

A number of crucial components emerged as the foundation stones of the classroom culture where first and second year Level 3 Acting students and graduate volunteers interact to create an 'extended family' classroom culture where reciprocal peer and cross-age learning is at the heart of daily practice. :

1. It is an *established culture,* assimilated daily and handed down with each student generation.
2. *Peer and cross-age interaction* occurs on a daily basis.
3. It is a three-tier model of learning, an '*extended family' ethos*, where *graduate volunteers*, guide and inspire the *second years*, who in turn guide and inspire the *first years*.
4. It is a *safe, supportive, nurturing space*, sustained each year, where students find the courage to take risks.
5. It is a *flexible and unpredictable* learning environment, where students are not bound by prior knowledge or preconceived notions. All students feel free to contribute to their own and others' learning journeys and development, be it academic, artistic, social or emotional.

Key teaching methods within the three-tier system that promote active and collaborative peer and cross-age teaching and learning are:

1. The 'buddy' system
2. Peer and cross-age *daily* observation
3. Peer and cross-age *daily* feedback
4. Graduate volunteers

Three key benefits of the three-tier learning system emerged:

1. *Confidence:* watching older peers take risks inspires students to work harder and push themselves outside their comfort zone – being willing to take a risk is a key component of their increased confidence.

2. *Emotional Resilience:* seeing older peers exchange honest feedback on a daily basis enables students to progress from taking feedback as negative criticism to embracing it positively as a powerful learning tool.

3. *Critical thinking skills:* giving and receiving feedback develops students' higher level cognitive skills and deepens subject knowledge which is then applied to their own learning. This in turn had a positive effect on their final grades.

A plan for disseminating the research findings within the College has begun (see Appendix 4 – Dissemination Strategy).

The positive and encouraging findings of this study are an ideal foundation for further research and a wider educational relevance established. An MPhil course of study would have the benefit of two cycles of practice as well as the findings of this research study to draw upon.

The two key impressions that emerged as the essential components of the catalytic circumstances required for the students' development were peer and cross-age *observation* and *inspiration*. It is certainly fitting that the verb 'to inspire' can mean either 'to motivate' or 'to inhale'. Both meanings can be applied here: the students observe each other and, by doing so, breathe in the inspiration from their peers' offerings. If this is the key to the study's conclusion, then it is a very humbling, simple and obvious one. That is, the notion that *students are inspired by each other to attempt what they already know they can achieve if they do attempt.* The teacher just has to ensure the environment and given circumstances for that inspiration are favourable and conducive to learning. In the case of this study, they are the foundation stones of the 'extended family' classroom culture listed above, namely an *established, safe, supportive and nurturing space within a flexible environment, where peer and cross-age interaction can occur on a daily basis.*

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APPENDIX 1 – INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Dear Student / Parent / Guardian

I am delighted to be part of the ETF-SUNCETT Practitioner-led Research Programme (PRP), having been accepted on to the MA course in Educational Research. This research is undertaken in the context of my practice and I would like to thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study.

The purpose of this study is:
- ***To gain insight into how cross-age peer learning, teaching and feedback develops confidence, emotional resilience and critical thinking skills in acting students.***
  In essence, this study is a reflective investigation of my own practice and teaching methodology.

The benefits of the research will be:
- To better understand how cross-age peer interaction among young acting students has a positive impact on the students' personal, social and academic development.

The methods that will be used to meet this purpose include:
- Class observations
- Discussion groups
- Questionnaires
- Analysis of students' written and practical work

Participating students are encouraged to ask questions or raise concerns at any time about the nature of the study or the methods used and have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Do feel free to contact me at any time at the e-mail address listed below.

Insights gathered by methods listed above, involving you and other participants, will be used to write a qualitative research report. A summary of this report will be presented at the ETF (Education & Training Foundation) Annual Research Conference 2019 and possibly other conferences. Extracts from the report may be published at some point in the future. Although direct quotes may be used in the report, your name and other identifying information will be kept anonymous.

With thanks,

Irene Rambota
Course Leader – Acting for Stage & Screen
Buckinghamshire College Group
irambota@buckscollegegroup.ac.uk

I acknowledge that I have read and understand the above information. I am aware that I can discontinue my participation in the study at any time.

Student _____ Date_____
                                                   (Signature)

Parent / Guardian if under 18 _____ Date _____
                                                   (Signature)

APPENDIX 2 – RESEARCH STUDY QUESTIONS

Examples of research study questions:

Thinking about the classroom environment, where cross-age peer learning, teaching and feedback takes place (first years, second years and graduate volunteers), can you let me know of **inspiring moments/experiences:**

- where you felt *receiving or giving feedback* helped you
    o understand the craft of acting better
    o understand areas you feel you need to develop within your acting
    o helped your critical thinking skills (made you think more deeply, helped you make connections and links, helped you analyse yours and other's acting)
    o develop confidence (in any way)
    o gave you courage to speak out more in class
    o gave you courage to contribute to discussion
    o become more emotionally resilient (for instance, being able to take feedback without feeling it was criticism)

    Did it make a difference if the feedback came from 1st year, 2nd year or graduate volunteer?

- where you were inspired by *teaching or learning* from your peers (1st year, 2nd year or graduate volunteers). This may have been by watching them or being in a show with them, or having something explained to you.

- where you *gained confidence* by being in a class with 1st years, 2nd years and graduate volunteers.

- Where you *gained confidence* from students sharing stories of their past anxieties, fears etc? Eg. A 2nd year speaking about fear of improvisation, or controlling their performances because of fear of the unknown, etc.

- where you *developed emotional strength* being in a class/show with 1st years, 2nd years and graduate volunteers

- where you developed your *critical thinking skills* being in a class with 1st years, 2nd years and graduate volunteers

- where you found *courage* to take a risk

- where you found you *didn't care* any more about doing it 'right' or 'wrong' or making a 'mistake'

- where you stopped *judging yourself*

- where you stopped *judging others*

- where you feel the *confidence* gained from this cross-age peer interaction has helped you in your life *outside of College.*

APPENDIX 3 – STUDENT STORIES *(page 1)*

"An example of me taking inspiration from a second year:

In my first year I remember us doing different exercises in classes to workshop the characters that we had in our FMP [final major project] show, '---------'. Lots of our characters had big emotional journeys in the script, including my character '-----', so the workshops were mainly to find vulnerability in our characters. One of them consisted of us thinking about our character's biggest fear and going into this fear imagining that it was actually happening. I, along with my classmates really struggled with this as I found that it scared me as an actor going to a dark place with a character. Because of this I blocked my characters emotions and needed and it was very inward. I didn't fully commit to the character meaning that the exercise was half my emotion and half of the character, making me feel uncomfortable after. We had a chat about letting ourselves go to that vulnerable place and that we needed to allow the character without blocking. With this in mind I set myself the target to find these moments, however I was unsure of how I would get to that place before the show.

We then had a lesson later that week in which our second years were rehearsing for their upcoming FMP, '----------'. In the lesson one of our second years, Sylvia, was auditioning for the character '------', in which she was doing a monologue where she was crying over her lover's dead body. Watching Sylvia giving herself permission to allow the character's high emotions through really inspired me that I could go to dark places for a character. I watched her take her time and breathe deeply without rushing, which showed me that I could take as much time as I needed whilst still captivating an audience. As well as this I watched her breathe out of the scene, making noises to return back to her own state of mind. I then applied these observations to my ending monologue for my character '------' and found that once I had been to that dark place, it wasn't scary to me anymore and I could take myself in and out of emotional stakes easily.

From being inspired by that one person in a lesson, I now feel I find it easier to access emotions that my character is feeling and that I can let it out to affect other people without going inwards on myself."
Liz, second year Level 3 Acting student
(Written work)

"Emotional resilience could be building up your courage to take on characters with high emotional drivers through trusting that they can flow through us as actors and not get stuck inside us. To help us with this we learnt technical skills such as breathing deeply as the character and 'saying goodbye' to a character and watching them walk away whilst breathing and making noises after embodying them. As well as this we support each other in a group and learn through watching each other. For example, in her first year, Eloise struggled with ------ [character in final show], who had huge emotional drivers for telling her story. However, through learning more technical skills in lessons and having support from her class mates, she was able to take on ----- [character] in '-----' [second year show] and allowed the character to flow in and out of her freely during rehearsals and the show without being damaged. From this I think she will now trust herself more to take on other characters with high emotional drivers without worrying about the emotion being trapped."
Liz, second year Level 3 Acting student
(Notes from class discussion)

APPENDIX 3 – STUDENT STORIES *(page 2)*

"An example of me realising how key feedback is to improving myself and furthering my learning of the craft:

In our second year, we had a unit called 'Auditions'. I think it was this unit where I truly understood how important feedback from my peers and tutor was in improving myself as an actor. As well as this, I got a hunger to show my work and explore. I remember one example in particular where I was showing my monologues to the class before I had my first drama school audition at Guildhall. When I first showed my monologue of '----' from '-----', I got lots of notes from everyone some of these being:

-That I had lots of 'Liz-isms' and that I hadn't found much of a character. I was playing an older character who was filled with hate towards different racial groups and I was told that I needed to find this in my body and posture as well as through my voice.

-I also needed to work on my intentions in the scene and to work more to affect the other person.

I then tried the monologue again working on these two things specifically and found that I worked a lot more. I could feel the hate towards the other character '-----' in the scene burning in my stomach, and working on what I wanted to make him feel with clarity made the monologue less inward, meaning that the story was told to the audience. I really felt that in this lesson my monologue went on a huge journey, making the story so much clearer for the audience, just by working on some feedback that my classmates had picked up on. In turn it clicked in my head that by being fearless to show my work, even when I'm unsure of it, I can improve the clarity of the story and honour the character's intentions. Since this lesson I have always been keen on doing my scenes whether we're rehearsing a play or always just getting up and trying things. Having peer feedback as well gives me confidence as I know that my classmates will be truthful with me when something works for them and when something doesn't."
Liz, second year Level 3 Acting student
(Written work)

"I found that I have now more courage to contribute to class when I was helping to give feedback to the first years when they had just performed their performances. I gave them points on how they can improve ahead of when they went to perform in the school in front of the children. I felt that I was inspired by other members of the class to give feedback to help them improve as I know what it was like when I was in the first year being told to work on my projection so that the children could hear what I was saying."
Jenny, second year Level 3 Acting student
(Response to research study questions)

"By being inspired by the graduates who took part in the show it has made me take more risks during performances and exploring different ways of performing the scene rather than holding back during performances or rehearsals."
Jenny, second year Level 3 Acting student
(Response to research study questions)

APPENDIX 3 – STUDENT STORIES *(page 3)*

"An example of how lessons I am learning in class helped me outside of the lesson:

Over the two years I have definitely gone on a journey of accepting and working on feedback rather than blocking and taking it to heart. I have learnt through observing myself and others that the people that make excuses or don't listen to feedback, don't progress as actors. As well as this, people who take feedback to heart, like I used to do and go home and wallow about how they did something 'wrong', also can't progress as actors as they are judging themselves. Rather, people that actively listen and encourage feedback, and use the feedback to fuel improving themselves can improve massively and can go even deeper into characters.

This mind-set I feel I now have adopted, and am always hungry to constructive criticism so that I can go further and deeper into understanding my character and honouring their stories.

A key moment into me taking feedback professionally, was when we filmed our audition monologues and watched them back. Our tutor told us that when watching our monologues back, we should try viewing ourselves as we would view another actor, giving them feedback such as needing more urgency, stronger intentions, etc., not judging our hair, or being bad at acting etc. This really helped me to cut myself slack and not be so nit-picky and judge-y of myself but to actually actively be kind to myself and give myself targets that I could work on to improve myself.

I try to let this carry over into everyday life, for example with my drama school auditions when I got rejected, instead of beating myself up about it, I tried to say to myself what I would say to a friend who had been rejected, e.g. maybe I just wasn't right for the course, or maybe I was too young etc. Just as importantly as this, when I got recalls, I allowed myself to praise myself as I would a friend for my hard work. Another example would be if I got in an argument with a friend or family member, rather than being angry at myself for losing my temper, I would think about why I lost my temper and how I could approach the situation next time seeing the other person's point of view more and being kinder to them."
Liz, second year Level 3 Acting student
(Written work)

" I can't quite pinpoint why I can't find -------- [Shakespearean character], it's serving as a big challenge for me, but it's pushing me to become a character that I have never portrayed before. It's my own fault for holding myself back and is incredibly unfair on the text that has been given to me and the slimy character that is ------ [Shakespearean character]. To help me, Lance performed the piece in order to give me inspiration. He was so incredibly free with everything he was doing, he wasn't afraid of holding back which led to some hilarious physical comedy and such positive and brightening energy that I had never even grazed when performing it myself. Despite feeling that I should have felt intimidated by this, I didn't. It only led to me feeling inspired and motivated to bring the character alive and embrace the weirdness that the character has."
Steve, second year Level 3 Acting student
(Written work)

"Being in a class with first years and graduate volunteers has helped me take more risks with the characters I have played in shows."
Jenny, second year Level 3 Acting student
(Response to research study questions)

APPENDIX 3 – STUDENT STORIES *(page 4)*

"When we watched our film and tv scene, I was very disappointed in my own performance. I could see that I wasn't really listening to what the other actors were saying, which is weird since I've been giving [sic] it as advice for so long. Opal [second year student] described it as if I was reading their lines in my head (something her and a fair few other 2nd years could relate to at some point, something I found very encouraging, as they have clearly made progress since that point, inspiring me to not be held back by things I do wrong and to always work, making progress as a result)."
Matthew, first year Level 3 Acting student
(written work)

"Today Greg [graduate volunteer] came into our lessons. While he may not be quite as powerful as Lance [graduate volunteer] or as emotionally vulnerable as Charlie [graduate volunteer], he brought with him an air of quiet confidence with no element of actual cockiness. He also didn't worry about anything he viewed as a mistake, there was a seamless transition between making the mistake and working past it, never even dipping his toe into self-pity, something I have yet to achieve. Hopefully over the next two years I can learn to be just as confident in my abilities and as professional about my mistakes as Greg.
Matthew, first year Level 3 Acting student
(written work)

"We ran through the court scene a few times during auditions and this showed me the power Charlie [graduate volunteer] brought to '-------' [character in scene] and caused me to realise that I have a tendency to shy away from my own power, particularly when directing it at other actors, quite possibly out of fear of hurting them. If I can be fully invested while also keeping a watchful "third eye" as an actor to make sure nothing goes terribly wrong as well as maintaining good vocal technique, I should be able to resolve this and give everything I have to each and every scene."
Matthew, first year Level 3 Acting student
(Response to research study questions)

"While I haven't really had issues with judging myself or other, the welcoming and kind attitude the second years have was the perfect thing to promote that kind of attitude to us as first years. An attitude that is most conducive to our development as actors.

Towards the beginning of the year I struggled with critical thinking, but encouragement from my tutor combined with suggestions from the 2nd years regarding the potential ways in which I could analyze a situation and how to use it to progress, but also ultimately motivating me to critically analyze as often and as deeply as possible.

I would undoubtedly say that the presence and inclusion of past graduates, volunteers and 2nd years in our lessons has helped me a great deal in the aforementioned ways, so much that I can only imagine how little I would have developed without their input, inspiration and assistance."
Matthew, first year Level 3 Acting student
(response to study questions)

APPENDIX 3 – STUDENT STORIES *(page 5)*

"Critical thinking is being able to analyse your experiences and willing to apply that to your learning, rather than expecting to passively learn everything you need."
Matthew, first year Level 3 Acting student
(Class discussion)

"At the start of my first year I did take on some of the constructive criticism personally. I feel this is because in secondary school we gave feedback in our drama classes, but people were too afraid to say something specifically to you on what you can improve on and it was normally very general. So I wasn't used to getting the honest feedback we get in our classes [at College]. I also feel this is what hindered me by our drama class [at school] being very general with feedback and not thinking analytically and also not being able to analyse myself as an actor. You would normally be told ' That was very good' or ' it would be better if you used the space more'. It was very generalised and I feel this is because some people can be quite sensitive, and get upset by comments - taking them personally. But until you realise honest feedback is going to help you, you aren't going to improve. This is why I feel it was nice to hear feedback from our second years, because they were extremely helpful and they had the extra year of training to be able to give us detailed notes and they were able to relate back to their experiences if they had the same insecurities as you had when performing a piece. For example when we did animal work with our second years I was always afraid of what I was going to look like or if I was going to look stupid. I then realised there was no time to worry about that as everyone else in the class was a different animal and was completely committed to their animal, and I looked like the stupid one if I didn't become an animal and held onto my insecurity. By us all coming together and working as one, your insecurities start to drift away, helping you carry on developing further in your journey.

As we saw them give each other honest feedback, and the trust they all had with each other which was really nice to see, this then helped us as first years come together and build a trust with each other - that we are all here to help each other with feedback and that it is never going to be personal.

It was tough at first as it can be a shock when someone tells you, that your performance was low in energy or that they didn't think you were being very truthful in a scene. But if you look at it from a different perspective they are trying to help you and get you to understand how to improve yourself and develop on your journey by listening to the notes you are given and taking them on board constructively and never personally as it is never personal; it is a job and you are learning to develop and improve at it.

I now always want to have feedback and know about anything I can improve on, as it is the only way you can really learn and develop yourself further as an actor. The feedback I feel is a really important part of the learning journey we go on. It makes you grow stronger in class and as a person. Telling the truth, helping your fellow actors by not sugar-coating how you really feel. You also grow great trust with the people in your class and build great friendships as you are true to one another. I feel by peer learning in other subjects has the potential to achieve great things as the older classes are going to be there to guide the younger class and relate to them in many ways , helping them develop in their journey."
Somer, second year Level 3 Acting student
(Response to research study questions)

APPENDIX 3 – STUDENT STORIES *(page 6)*

"This is my experience from being in first year, learning from our second years:

When we were rehearsing for "---------"[outdoor show] (in my first year), I remember having to keep going over the same scene several times because I just wasn't putting in the energy that was needed. I also wasn't fully getting what I wanted from the scene and connecting with '------' [character in scene] - therefore the scene died in energy and it became very boring to watch. Although I was not aware of this and didn't understand what I was doing that was making the scene boring. So two of our second years, Sylvia and Declan, volunteered to show us what our performance looked like. Myself and Donald [other actor in scene] took a seat and watched their interpretation of what we were doing. This was an eye opening moment for me, because I didn't realise how under-energised the scene was. They then performed the scene as how they would do it as the characters. Now this was even more eye opening for me as it showed me how much I could explore with my character and showed me that I shouldn't be afraid to take risks and allow myself to have fun with a character. I didn't need to be so rigid. Both Sylvia and Declan showed me this and I finally understood how important intention and energy is within a scene. I also realised I needed to just simply have fun and relax into my character and she will just come. And because of learning that I should take risks and have more fun with my characters, from my second years, I then felt free to use my instincts and felt free within myself. And then my character felt free to come to me.

This has taught me a lot and I am now always aware of energy in scenes. Especially when watching our first years now, because it is boring to watch a scene with low energy and I want to make sure I am honest with other people in scenes and with myself about energy, urgency and intention. It drives the scene. Using energy and intention is what makes it interesting and the audience want to keep watching more.

I think it helped getting feedback from our second years as they have been through the same experiences and have had that extra year of training, where they understand the craft more and think deeper, analytically , knowing more about the craft, therefore their advice is very useful.

Also having graduates come in, who are in the acting world is amazing too because they are living a career we all want to pursue and with them giving us honest feedback it is extremely beneficial. I also remember we had a graduate come in called Katy, (who is now a working actor) and she taught us Laban's methods. This was extremely useful because I found something new within these exercises. It made us use our bodies and helped inform the characters I found internally as well as physically because I was freer in the usage of my body. Before our FMP shows I tried experimenting with the 'Laban efforts' I had been taught, and this benefitted me massively."
Somer, second year Level 3 Acting student
(Response to research study questions)

APPENDIX 3 – STUDENT STORIES *(page 7)*

"Receiving and giving feedback was a huge part of my journey within the first year, as I came from GCSE's where there was not a lot of constructive feedback given and at the start of the year I found it very difficult to take on and give constructive feedback. However as the year progressed I was inspired by our second years at the time who were all open and honest with each other with their feedback, which then gave me the confidence to voice my opinions as well as the understanding that all feedback given was for me to better my skill set. This then prepared me for my second year where I now feel very comfortable taking and giving feedback to help better my fellow actors as well as taking notes on board for myself. From the peer feedback that made me build resilience in the first year so that now with every piece of feedback I am given I see it as a new way to improve and develop my skill set as an actor, which is not how I saw peer feedback at the start of first year.

Due to the fact that our classes are so connected with our first years I am able to learn a lot about my critical thinking skills as I will be watching actors from both first and second year that have all gone on separate learning journeys and all require different points of feedback to help them improve. This allows me to understand more about myself as an actor because I can see different things in my classmates that I know that I can work on, such as my breathing. I know that my breath is my main problem and it is very interesting to watch other actor who needs to work on their breathing because it gives me the opportunity to see what I'm doing and how I can then improve on this. From the peer feedback that I received about my breathing it inspired me to do something about it inside as well as outside of college, I now go to the gym three times a week and focus on my breathing whilst doing cardio, which will allow my heart to get into better shape as well as allowing me to say more lines whilst I am out of breath, which is definitely something which I will need as a skill for our Shakespeare assignment.

"Being on this course and constantly interacting with new people allows me to grow in confidence even in the first day, as I was a very shy person before I came on this course and I would hate having conversations with other people that weren't my friends. But due to the classes being so integrated in the first few months really allowed me to find myself and who I am as a person. From a young age I always loved colour and at school I was bullied for it and it made me silent and lost who I am, but coming on this course and mixing with so many different people really allowed me to find myself and my love for so many things in my childhood that I forgot about, such as my love for colour and expressing myself through that. It has also given me the confidence to talk to so many new people and constantly be hungry to learn new things which is not how I was in first year. This also allowed me to stop judging myself as I used to wear makeup to feel comfortable with who I am but coming here allowed me to stop wearing makeup and be comfortable with who I am, as well being able to stop judging others for being who they want to be."
Eloise, second year Level 3 Acting student
(Response to research study questions)

"When I was in '---------' [Christmas Show], Liz [second year student] and Lance [graduate volunteer] really inspired me by how much they threw themselves into their characters and how invested they were into them. It's gave me inspiration to fully invest myself into things from then on."
Delilah, first year Level 3 Acting student
(Response to research study questions)

APPENDIX 3 – STUDENT STORIES *(page 8)*

"I went to Zumba last week and I am so glad because I just felt so relaxed and I know that I'm just being stiff every second of my life and I just had fun and there was a girl and a boy behind who were just sitting and judging the people who were actually dancing. And maybe from their point of view I was the lame one because look at my movements, but from my point of view they were lame because they were doing nothing, just watching us and I just realised that it is the same with acting because someone who's not doing anything grabs some more attention than someone who's actually working, not because it's more interesting, but because it's unbearable to watch and you watch it because you're thinking why am I actually watching this so I had a life lesson: to understand the fact that you won't always be good enough for someone but if you are good enough for yourself then it all that matters and it is a start."
Astraea, first year Level 3 Acting student
(written work)

"I found that I have now more courage to contribute to class when I was helping to give feedback to the first years when they had just performed their[children's theatre] performances. I gave them points on how they can improve ahead of when they went to perform in the school in front of the [primary school] children. I felt that I was inspired by other members of the class to give feedback to help them improve as I know what it was like when I was in the first year being told to work on my projection so that the children could hear what I was saying."
Jenny, second year Level 3 Acting student
(Response to research study questions)

During the show, I was inspired by Greg [graduate] and Charlie [graduate] because they kept going when they forgot lines and Greg was only in few rehearsals and still went for it and when their voices went they just kept on going. Also Opal [second year student] when she stayed still for such a long time even struggling with ADHD. I think it's very inspirational because I couldn't stay still in the Christmas show.
Arthur, first year Level 3 Acting student
(Shared online feedback document)

Examples of reciprocal feedback notes from online feedback document
- *Takes criticism so well and takes it on the chin and works on it.*
- *Also trust your instincts on stage. You kept comforting Greg on stage so you were trusting your instincts.*
- *Impressed how you worked on your physicality. Kept pushing further in each rehearsal.*
- *You have a good natural instinct at finding something. You don't trust what you have inside most of the time. Whatever the natural instinct is - trust it !*
- *Can see how physically free you have become. Very stiff at first but now have opend up so much!!!!*
- *Went for it in this show. Charlie[graduate] is Steve's [second year student]inspiration because they had so many convos [conversations] about allowing.*

APPENDIX 4 – DISSEMINATION STRATEGY

Dissemination strategy

Dissemination of the findings has already begun:

- I was invited to share my research findings at the recent College TLA (Teaching, Learning and Assessment) Conference. As a result, staff from other departments are now interested in incorporating the teaching methods into their practice, including the 'buddy system', peer feedback, graduate volunteers and bringing second years into first year classes as mentors.

- Plans have been put in place for a collaboration with English and Maths Department to disseminate my teaching methods and research findings into their classes. The plans include using the 'buddy system' in GCSE Maths classes and inviting Level 3 Acting students to help GCSE English students with text work, using drama to bring text to life. The GCSE Maths department collaboration will also see the implementation of student buddies from other departments such as Business to see how the business student 'buddies' compare to the acting student 'buddies'.

- Advanced practitioner recommendation to share teaching practice within department following class observation.

- In addition, I have spoken to Course Leaders from a very different subject area, the hospitality industry, in another FE College who are interested in bringing graduates back as volunteers to inspire their current students.

- I do foresee some challenges with the dissemination strategy and, as I found in my literature review, am aware that dissemination has been the stumbling block for many a study on the benefits of peer learning. My class sizes are small, which allows for deeper peer and cross-age relationships to be formed. It takes years to establish the 'extended family' classroom culture. Finally, acting students are, by nature, willing and eager communicators. However, if elements of the three-tier system of peer and cross-age learning can be extracted for use in other curriculum areas, I feel this is a good start.

- I have plans for further research, based on the encouraging findings of this research study of the benefits of peer and cross-age learning. I aim to apply to undertake an MPhil course of study, which will have the benefit of two cycles of practice as well as the findings of this research study.

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