

OUTSTANDING TEACHING, LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT

**FINAL REPORT ON THE OTLA PHASE 7 (ENGLISH) PROJECT –
DEVELOPING WRITING
City of Liverpool College and Hopwood Hall College**

City of Liverpool College and Hopwood Hall College
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For further information regarding the OTLA Phase 7 (English) programme and this project go to <https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla-7/>.

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Final report - Developing Writing

City of Liverpool College and Hopwood Hall College

This project aimed to challenge the stereotype of male learners not engaging in the process of creative writing, by removing the constraints of the old exam style pedagogy and instead introducing an alternative and encouraging environment to express thought, feelings and build confidence through the written word. We learned that creative writing which is not teacher assessed can break down barriers to young males' expression.

Summary

Two English tutors from the City of Liverpool College and Hopwood Hall College (both providers of further education with predominantly vocational courses) collaborated to develop a new approach to creative writing, where the process was entirely led by the learners. The project was rolled out to groups of largely male GCSE English resit learners, aged 16-19, studying typically male dominated vocational courses at college (for example: motor vehicle, construction trades and gaming).

Traditionally, these learners were reluctant to express their creativity, both verbally and in writing, and learners saw this as an area of study from which they could disengage, given that these skills were not conventionally something that boys could, would or should excel at. In many cases, this belief is carried from childhood, throughout schooldays and into the workplace and adulthood. In his research, 'Gender and Literacy: Improving Boys' Writing', Robin Lane refers to an HMI Ofsted report, where good practice has been identified in schools where 'pupils are often given choice as to the content of their writing, even when the form or genre is prescribed... efforts are made to make writing tasks purposeful, through seeking 'real' audiences, through publication and display, and through the use of writing to support throughout'. In the same report, he states that the impact of 'opportunities to write frequently' resulted in the following impact:

- 'Increased stamina for writing and also improved transcription
- Boys who wrote very little began to take risks and write more.
- Boys who were unenthusiastic about writing became engaged in their writing.
- Boys who had "loads of ideas" began to control their writing.'

We wanted to unlock the learners' potential using a completely different approach, and we were committed to de-bunking the myth of working-class low aspiration and the deficit model of male achievement.

Rationale

Historically, this group of predominantly teenage boys from diverse cultural, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds struggled to engage in creative writing of any sort. The learners have, generally, a limited vocabulary, poor spelling and grammar,

sometimes gaps in education, learning disabilities and difficulties, as well as, in some cases English as an additional language. This all leads to a lack in confidence in putting pen to paper and a feeling of disenfranchisement and that writing is not seen as relevant to their lives and futures. These young men feel they have nothing of value to say and that they have no tools or ability to say anything even if they could, making the task of writing overwhelming.

The challenges already identified within this group have significant consequences, both in terms of oracy, literacy and confidence, which will impact inevitably on behaviour, progress, mental health and wellbeing. We wanted to establish an atmosphere where creative thought could be safely explored and developed.

The introduction of the study programme and compulsory studies in English and maths has been and still is problematic in the sector, given that few learners see the relevance or importance of these subjects, especially when they do not plan to access higher education. In Jo Ireland's research paper (Ireland, 2019), both teacher and peer support are found to support learner motivation: 'They suggested that both peer cooperation and group interaction can increase positive perceptions of learning and educational achievement'. She further states that learners feel they benefit from smaller group sizes as this gives them easier access to support.

Approach

In order to push the boundaries of the stereotypes referred to above, we planned the project within the following framework:

- Learners to create writing prompts on any subject of their choice which would be shared with the partner college.
- The tutors to share the prompts with learners and the partner college learners to write creative responses – with no scaffolding but only the prompt supplied.
- The tutors to scan the writing produced back to the partner college and the reciprocating learners to review it, giving feedback without referring to traditional spelling, punctuation and grammar (SPaG) or exam board grades and mark schemes.
- Learners to then either continue with the piece of writing started by a peer at a different college, or to start afresh with a new prompt.

As the project developed, we were faced with the following challenges:

- Heavily disrupted, or lost learning because of the impact of COVID-19, including a second lockdown from January 2021
- Digital poverty, which affected engagement
- Poor engagement from learners who had taken a resit in November and were waiting for the publication of their results.
- Issues around the content of what was written: there was some inappropriacy of content in football related matters and a distinct level of animosity in some cases. To prevent this from becoming an issue for safeguarding teams and to reduce a potential build-up of animosity we adapted our approach and

respective tutors held discussions with the groups to remind them of the aims of the project, and ask them to reframe their expectations. This presented an opportunity to discuss tolerance and respect as a life skill.

Tutors from both colleges were in regular contact and the framework for the project was revisited and adapted with the guidance of the project mentor. Adaptations included onboarding another English tutor at Hopwood Hall College from January 2021. We also integrated the use of other prompts for learners, including visual prompts such as artwork and paintings, as well as audio prompts such as pieces of music.

Professional learning: Evidence of changes in teaching, learning and assessment practices

The writing sessions were delivered at the end of a 90-minute GCSE session which was already timetabled.

In line with the ETF's Professional Standards (2014), the project tutors embraced the following approaches:

- Motivating and inspiring learners to develop their skills, many of which were already there. Through a coaching and mentoring approach, (particularly using Hawkins' (2007) CLEAR model: a clear understanding, listening, exploring, action and review) tutors were able to support the learners to make explicit what in many cases they already knew implicitly, but had been disinclined to reveal previously
- Offering learners the choice to select the pace and style of their learning with creative writing in order to enable the learners to build on the skills they already had.
- Valuing equality of opportunity to all learners in the groups, which meant expanding the project to two female learners for a period of time (see Appendix 2).
- Tutors critically reflecting together and evaluating the impact of the creative writing activities on the dynamics of the classroom and the changes in the way the learners worked.
- Feedback was peer to peer with no written teacher feedback and stimulus prompts often produced by learners for other learners.

Further research materials were accessed to support the project, namely through the issues raised in the book 'Boys Don't Try' (Pinkett and Roberts, 2019) and the statistically shocking evidence that boys in schools in the UK are struggling because of a range of issues including anxiety, low achievement (or low self-belief in the ability to achieve), behaviour, bullying, increasing mental health issues, sexist attitudes and an inability to express emotions. Inevitably, this problem spills over into the experience they have in further education.

Additionally, an increased awareness of the connection between the vulnerability created in the process of creative writing exposed a real need to reduce the stigma

male learners feel when faced with an activity which may reveal, or lay bare, their emotions. On this basis, the Hopwood tutor signed up for a mental health first aid qualification to be able to better support learners.

Evidence of improved collaboration and changes in organisational practices

It is no secret that the multi-faceted process of creative writing can lead to deep revelations and disclosures about the writer. As detailed above, some of the work produced by learners was of a very personal nature and therefore close attention was paid to pastoral, safeguarding and welfare issues raised. Swift and effective referrals were made in such cases as these.

In some cases, writing showed signs of aggression, hostility and acrimony. Tutors at both colleges responded appropriately to this and engaged with each other and the relevant support networks at the respective colleges. This again reflected the negative connections some learners associated with the process of writing and needed to be handled in an understanding, sensitive and trauma-informed way, with the intention of 'repairing' rather than 'punishing' learners' choices and practices. In discussions with learners about tolerance and acceptance of others, we found that young males appeared to feel that they needed to conform to a stereotype, where aggression based on perceived rivalries between their home-towns or cities or allegiance to football teams. In discussions with them about their choice of tone and language in their writing, we started to explore the possible reasons why. In most cases, they had not considered or reflected on this previously and once they had, they changed their approach. Tutors spoke about celebrating equality and diversity rather than seeing it as a threat.

Evidence of improvement in learners' achievements, retention and progression

Eliminating the process of correcting spelling, punctuation and grammar in learners' written work removed the immediate barrier of learners believing that their work was of a poor quality and released inhibitions caused by this. Almost all learners involved in the project expressed negative connotations of receiving marked work from their schooldays which was heavily corrected on technical skills and lacked encouragement for, and development of, creative skills.

The announcement of the cancellation of summer 2021 GCSE exams in January left many learners assuming that a notional grade would be submitted by the college (as in 2020). However, when it was communicated that there would be a series of assessments, including one with an option of creative writing, engagement and attendance increased significantly. At Hopwood Hall College, out of fifteen learners who attended the final GCSE assessments which took place instead of exams, seven took the creative writing option. Of these, all have achieved a percentage which, if upheld by the awarding body, will represent a grade four or above. This is very encouraging when we consider that the percentage of learners achieving a grade four or above for this vocational area in the last exam series in 2019 was 34%.

At the City of Liverpool college, 16 learners in a group of twenty-one achieved a grade 4 or above in the Creative Writing assessment in May 2021. This assessment has

been used towards the final Teacher Assessed Grades this year. Comparing this result to an assessment in December on Creative Writing over 60% of learners have improved their overall marks in a creative writing assessment. This has been very encouraging for us as a college, as we have seen as vast improvement within this group of writing skills. We have also seen an improvement of overall confidence with regards to Creative writing (see Appendix 3).

Learning from this project

Boys do try.

Understanding prior barriers to writing or experiences and breaking them down by staging an approach to the process helps to release the often hesitant, sometimes unenthusiastic and reluctant response from teenage male learners with creative writing.

They know much more than they often admit to.

Once these barriers are addressed and the process of removing them begins, the tutor can see the skills learners often keep hidden.

Ditch the SPaG (spelling, punctuation and grammar) focus

Removing an English tutor's automatic response to identifying technical errors allows learners to see the value in their creativity and develop this separately. The process feels less punitive and critical. Assessment of technical accuracy can be reintegrated later.

Online learning can hinder open and free self-expression

Many learners were much more willing to continue to develop their reading skills rather than their creative writing skills in the period of online learning. The reasons for this have not been explored due to time constraints. However, it is felt that learners have more courage to 'make mistakes' where they can receive regular feedback from peers and tutors in class, which is the model that had worked well until the period of lockdown. A writing task might take longer to complete than a reading analysis task and there is often a lack of self-discipline in teenage learners when being expected to complete independent study remotely.

Modelling emotional openness encourages creativity

Many young males find it challenging to express themselves openly because of established ideas of masculinity or deeply engrained attitudes to, and responses to, emotional openness and honesty. An important step to reducing this damage is to normalise the process of speaking and writing about emotions.

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Appendix 1 – The project team

| Project Role | Name | Job Role |
|---------------------|----------------------------------|--|
| Project Lead | Sian Walker | Programme Manager – English |
| Deputy Lead | Nicola McLean | Deputy Head of School Foundation English |
| Project team | Toni Friscuolo | Lecturer – English |
| | Helena Kane | Lecturer- English |
| Project Mentor | Sonia Thomas (ccConsultancy) | |
| Research Group Lead | Sue Lownsborough (ccConsultancy) | |

Appendix 2 – Feedback from learners

Email from Hannah – Hopwood learner involved in the project

Hannah joined the group late and therefore did not produce any writing until later in the year.

Sian Walker

Subject: FW: A big thank u

Siân Walker | Programme Manager: English (GCSE and Functional Skills) Hopwood Hall College | Rochdale Road | Middleton | M24 6XH
t: 0161 655 6911
e: sian.walker@hopwood.ac.uk
HopwoodPride

To: Sian Walker <Sian.Walker@hopwood.ac.uk>
Subject: A big thank u

CAUTION: This email originated from outside of the organization. Do not click links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender and know the content is safe.

I cannot thank you enough. You are amazing. I am So proud of myself.
Found a love for language and books that I never thought i would

Thanks again, all the best, keep being amazing and glam 

Hannah

Message from Jack – City of Liverpool College learner involved in the project.

I feel like I have made progress with my writing skills, due to the efforts of my teacher. I enjoyed writing stories based on music. I had never done this before. It really helped me become more confident in my ability.

Jack - 17

Appendix 3 – Examples of learners' writing

Hopwood Hall College (October 2020)

This evidence showcases the first writing we shared with Liverpool City College

It was a good day that day

It was a good day ~~when~~ when I watched
that game against Liverpool when UCL won
3-0 when Marcial DUC was on his ****
It was the best thing ever the Liverpool fans
were succc.

It was a go good day ~~the~~ that day
~~the~~ when man U beats Liverpool but
Suarez didn't see hand with ear so
at the end of the match ~~the~~ when man U
A(WON) ear ran one to Suarez and should
be take the ~~pass~~ ^{PASS} off by jumping out in
front of ~~the~~ him

manchester City Beat liverpool 6:0 cause liverpool are shocking
(worst team in the premier league). **** you liverpool
UP the blues DOWN your poos

① It was a good day that day, Manchester city
played ~~against~~ went head to head to win the
league and manchester city won the premier
league by 1 point. The same thing happened
with manchester united, the MFC rivals. ●

it was a good day that day when
I passed my driving test.

it was a good day that day when I
went to reception at college to pick up my
Carpentry and Joinery certificate up and
I had passed.

It was a good day that day when I ~~was~~ ^{was} ~~on~~ on holiday in Malta.

ANXIOUS

I WAS TRAPPED ~~IN~~... IN MY OWN HEAD
I WAS FRIGHTENED OF EVERYTHING AROUND ME
I WAS ~~BE~~ FALLING WITH DIZZINESS SHAKING,
WITH GOOSEBUMPS CRAWLING UP MY ARM LIKE
ANTS IN THEIR NESTS.

IT WAS A GOOD DAY THAT DAY UNTIL EVERYTHING
WENT DOWN HILL JUST OF SOMEONE TALKING
TO ME. DO YOU WANT TO KNOW WHAT HAPPENED?
WELL IT STARTED AS A NORMAL MORNING
I GOT DRESSED FOR WORK AND WENT TO THE BUS
STOP ~~IN~~ THEN I NOTICED SOMEONE LOOKING
AT ME. I HAVE NEVER

He did see what was happening

He did see what was happening on the other side of the
world because he ^{was} watching it on the news that day cause
he ^{was} busy on this side of the world that means
busy here

Tuesday 20th October 2020

He didn't c what was happening,
and then from out of know where,
boom there was police every
where & swarming in from every
street in view we made the quick
getaway and some how barely
escaped home free.

Hopwood Hall College (March 2021)

This is the second set of written work we exchanged with Liverpool City College. This was after a period of national lockdown and the learners had not been in class for almost 3 months.

Imagine you are at a football match...

Write a short, descriptive piece from the perspective of either...

The stressed manager.

The clumsy goal-keeper.

The club mascot.

The football.

The rowdy fan. ✓

I first came in, the place was very crowded, the place was flooded with fans. There was a lot of officers too since two of the greatest teams was playing against each other, Manchester United Team versus Manchester City team. The officers were cautious at all times if couple fans went raging, shouting or they could attack the other fans. Here they come, here my favourite team comes, singing and taking pictures. They then were preparing and setting setting their positions broadcast channels and photographers were all over the place, happy and excited for the game; Fans are all taking pictures. Here the match starts, 19 minutes in "and the first goal is scored for Manchester United by Mohamed Salah" shouts the broadcaster and the referee whistles to let them know they scored;

Imagine you are at a football match...

Write a short, descriptive piece from the perspective of either...

The stressed manager.

The clumsy goal-keeper.

The club mascot.

The football.

The rowdy fan.

The stressed manager.

Its been the first 10 minutes of the game and we are playing poorly, giving passes away in the danger area, everybody is being clumsy with the ball, everyone's distracted, nobody confident in the early stages. The referee is giving soft challenges like, soft pushes on people, little taps on the shins, ankle, and ~~foot~~ feet. Everyone is going down after each tackle which is wasting time ~~and~~ and destroying the flow of football. It just got even bad because they scored a scruffy goal which could of been prevented by ^{the} lack of contraction, and giving the ball away in are box.

Imagine you are at a football match...

Write a short, descriptive piece from the perspective of either...

- * The stressed manager.
- The clumsy goal-keeper.
- The club mascot.
- The football.
- The rowdy fan.

The score was 2-2 to ~~the~~ ^{my} opposing team it was the 85th minute and my team were defending for their lives. They were quickly darting from wing to wing trying with all their heart to regain back possession of the ball back to us and hopefully win us the game. As the game was progressing the attackers were anxious to get involved in the game to do their part. I looked around and assessed the pitch, as I was doing that my team saw an opportunity and struck when they had the chance. As this happened I saw a huge open space on the pitch. I screamed at the top of my lungs to hoof it down pitch. By this point my heart rate was beat was extraordinary. I was nervous and extremely excited. All of a sudden it happened. The kick from the midfielder was top class he used it. The control from the attacker was on point. He swerved around 2 defenders and struck the ball dead center, and I witnessed in slow motion the ball travel past the remaining defenders. The ball slipped through the goalkeeper's fingers and kind of cleanly in the top corner. Within an instant the crowd went wild. I'll never forget the look on the other team's manager's face his head dropped in shame as his team fell to the floor when the final whistle blew.

Imagine you are at a football match

Write a short descriptive piece from the perspective of either

The Stressed manager

The Clumsy goal-keeper

The Football ✓

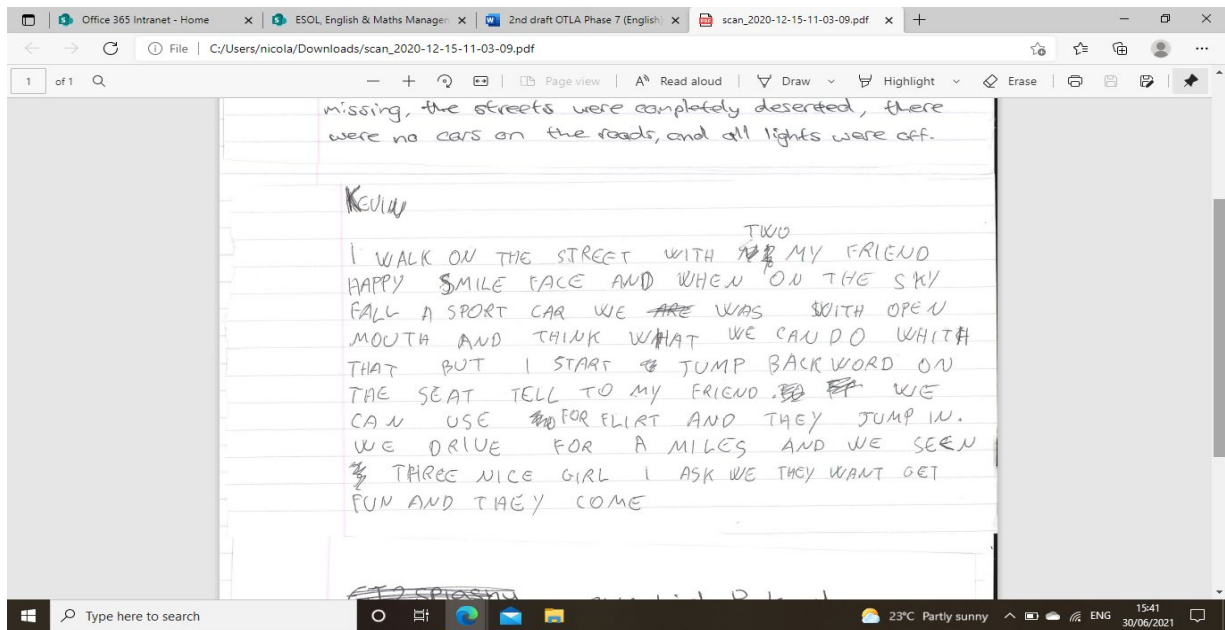
○ The rowdy fan

The warm grip of the referee the feeling of safety he gives me with his hug the scream or the whistle then, Bang, I felt like I had just been shot the kind of knocked out of me BUT the balls kept coming one after another I just wanted it to end they was hitting me so hard the grass would fly with me getting shorter and shorter after every kick.

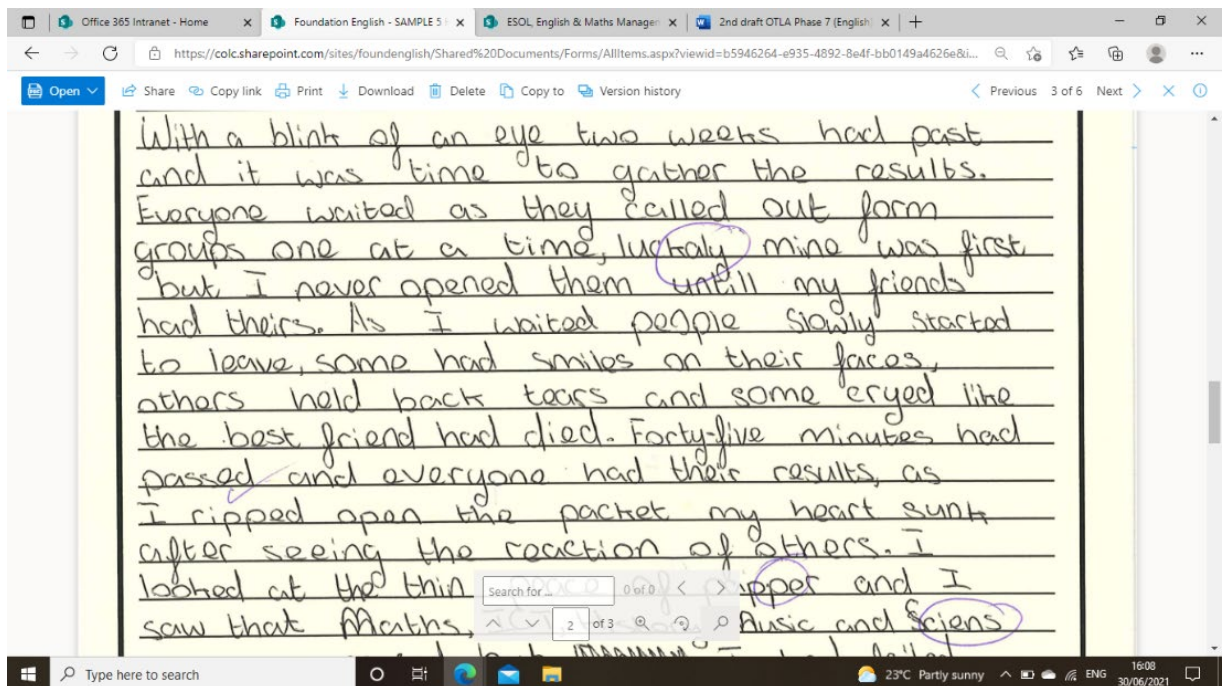
The grass was cold and wet with sharp blades slicing ~~at~~ my face as I was forced ~~to~~ over the dirt

I was in the middle of the pitch then I suddenly I heard the whistle blow I could feel the ground trembling beneath me as the football player starts to run towards me and kick me just before I got kicked, I hold mt breath ready to take the pain of the football player boot and suddenly I got launched up to the sky I could feel the cold fast wind brush past my soft shell, and I could also hear the rowdy fan shouting, In the distance then in one second I hit the ground at full speed I could fell the hard, cold ground touching my soft shell. Then I got kicked again from one of the players I could fell the anger of the player kicking me around the football pitch and I could fell the hard plastic grass brushing all over me and could also see the keeper was scared when I was getting closer and closer to him and I could tell he was not ready then my life flash before when I got kicked so hard it felt like a got shot in the back by gun. Then in no time I was flying throw the air toward the keeper chest and in the split second I hit him in the chest I could hear a loud crack and I drop to the floor like lead ball.

The City of Liverpool College (December 2020)



City of Liverpool College (May 2021)



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