

Pupil and Staff Engagement

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

5x5 was a Creative Partnerships funded project based at Abbeydale Grange (secondary) school in Sheffield and employing, as a Creative Partner, Ashley Barnes the Artistic Director of Dead Earnest Theatre. The main focus was the engagement of staff and in particular teachers and Learning Support Assistants (LSAs). It was felt that by engaging staff that there would be a drip-down effect on the engagement of pupils. After much discussion, this was honed down to an idea of getting teachers and pupils to plan and evaluate lessons together. The final research question was deductive in approach and asked: What happens to enjoyment and engagement in learning when students and staff use a creative approach to work together to plan and evaluate lessons? There were six stages to the project:

- Recruitment (and engagement)
- Observation and interviews
- Peer support
- Risk taking
- Reaching our goal
- Dissemination

Recruitment and engagement

The project was called 5x5 because it was envisaged that Ashley would work with five teachers on five occasions. However, the first challenge was to recruit those five teachers.

The approach taken was to deliver a 'forum theatre' performance to the entire staff that made observations about the school and about engagement in general. It was also considered vital to start the process of discussing engagement with a piece of training that was in itself engaging.

The forum piece was written by Ashley and entitled 'For the high jump'. It featured two teachers, a member of the support staff and a pupil. The narrative followed a disaffected male student who fell out with his PE teacher and the attempts by the behaviour supervisor to re-engage him. The behaviour supervisor made progress by explaining the science behind the long jump, but when he suggested to the teachers that they could teach in a cross curricular manner, they were affronted by what they perceived as someone who didn't understand teaching telling them what to do.

The narrative was performed and then replayed in order for the audience to interject, to challenge the characters about their attitudes and even to step up on stage and show what they would do. At the end of the forum teachers were asked to fill out some evaluation and to sign up to the programme.

The next day, there were eight teachers and two LSAs that had signed up to the programme. After meeting together to look at logistics (i.e. Ashley could only come in on certain days in the week) this number was narrowed down to five teachers and two LSAs joining the main programme and another teacher joining only the peer support elements.

Feedback from the Forum:

“I loved it – time flew. The best inset ever” [Teacher who had worked in school for 16 years]

“The only opportunity we’ve had to debate ‘real’ issues as a staff” [Teacher at school for 3 years]

“Best training for over a year” [Teacher 3 yrs at school]

“This was an excellent use of the twilight session. It clearly illustrated how we as teachers can

- make life harder for students & ourselves
- miss opportunities to build positive relationships (or repair) with students” [Senior management 8 yrs at school]

Observation & interviews

After recruiting the staff, the next stage was for Ashley to go into their lessons. The idea sold to the teachers from the outset was that Ashley would film ten minutes of their lesson and then show it back to them. In much the same way that forum theatre works, the idea was for Ashley to adopt a ‘coaching’ role in the feedback sessions by coaxing responses and answers out of the staff rather than offering his own. In theory the teachers would be able to see things they wanted to change and would therefore try them out.

An interesting and coincidental feature of the group of teachers taking part was the variety of experience they had. This ranged from a Head of Department with 16 years of experience to a recently qualified teacher with just two years experience.

They were asked for their reasons for joining the programme and what outcomes they were hoping for. The teacher’s reasons for joining were generally to do with “Looking for new ideas” or “improve classroom management”, but the LSAs

had a very different reason. They ran a 'before school' literacy class and they wished for more recognition ("To highlight & extend good practice on a new literacy initiative"). Similarly the teachers hoped to get out of the project "better lesson dynamics", "students more motivated to learn" and "to be a better teacher by learning techniques", but the LSAs hoped "to see this good practice extend beyond our group to begin to influence main stream lessons"

They were also asked for a base line score for their own 'engagement' and 'enjoyment'. This was marked out of ten. Whereas the overall score for enjoying the job was 9.8, this dropped to 7.5 when considering teaching their nominated class. There were similar scores for engagement (9.6 & 7.5).

Each teacher / LSA was asked to nominate a lesson and then two pupils from that class to be interviewed for feedback about the teacher. One pupil they had to consider to be 'engaged' and the other 'disengaged'. This distinction was drawn from the school system of teachers offering 'effort grades' on three occasions during the school year to see how pupils are progressing.

It was not possible to follow some of these students throughout the programme. For example one student left with her family at Christmas to go to London, the Yr9 technology students were all in a cycle where they moved to a different subject after a number of weeks and some students refused to be interviewed more than once. Nonetheless their responses were very interesting to the teachers (many of whom initially wanted some reassurance that the students liked them) and choice quotes were later taken and displayed in the staff room.

Peer support

In addition to the one to one feedback sessions were also group sessions. The idea was to bring all the participants together to share their experiences and feel part of a team. These sessions were timetabled to occur during lesson 7 (an additional period at the end of the day that is used for extra curricular activities or cramming before exams).

After an initial failed attempt to instigate Action Learning Sets, these sessions became an opportunity for the staff to observe each other teaching. This was achieved by Ashley selecting a different teacher for each session and editing together a short sequence drawn from lessons he had filmed that illustrated an element of their approach. For example one film was called 'Teaching as a performance' and showed how the teacher would position the students so they could see and then use her voice and props to the best effect.

Although these sessions became extremely valuable and important they took a long time to get going. In particular this was because it was always difficult to get enough people together for this session.

Risk taking

Christmas arrived very quickly and the programme hadn't seemed to have got very far. The peer sessions had only just

shifted from Action Learning Sets to observing each other teaching, the 'watch yourself teaching' coaching approach had not lead to much discernable change and the pupils had, when interviewed, gone so far as to say that they hadn't noticed any difference. Also, by involving extra people there was less time per person. Therefore a decision was made to shift the timetable and the emphasis slightly.

The first of the films featured the LSA before school literacy group (Breaking through the barriers) and by creating a film that they could distribute, we also achieved some of their aims for being involved in the project.

It was also recognised that making changes to teaching styles might need more than discussion and so it was decided to challenge each of the teachers to take a risk in one of their lessons. This lesson could be filmed and the pupils interviewed so that a measure of its success could be discussed.

However, it also transpired that two teachers (at different times) had long periods of leave in the period after Christmas. Although Ashley was still able to work with them, they were not able to complete the full programme and so weren't involved in risk taking.

On each occasion the students responded in interviews very positively to the lesson. They said they found the lessons 'enjoyable' and were observed on camera as being 'engaged'. They also said they wanted more. For the teachers it was an opportunity to safely try something very different from their normal lesson and then reflect on what worked so that they could think about how they would do it the next time.

Reaching our goal

Buoyed by the success of risk taking, the next step was to have the pupils and teachers planning and evaluating a lesson together. By doing this we also achieved the stated goal in the research question.

Dissemination

By the end of the academic year there will have been three staff training sessions that will have been shaped by the project.

The first of these (a forum presentation delivered as a twilight session and called 'For the High Jump') was discussed at the beginning of the report. This was then followed by another forum performance delivered during an INSET day in February, which although not directly part of this project was highly influenced by the student interviews and lesson observations. This piece was focussed, in particular, on building personal relationships between staff and pupils and was called "This time it's personal". In June there will be a third staff training event (twilight session), which will feature a film of the project and will be lead by the teachers involved.

This third twilight session was borne out of Ashley being asked to report his findings to senior management and then the findings being taken forward into this training. In particular the teachers were very positive about the peer support sessions and requested the opportunity to continue these in some form or other.

IMPACT on school

The final impact on the school has still not filtered through and is hard to measure. We had also set ourselves other objectives for the project, two of which were:- to measure the impact on enjoyment and engagement in learning for participating students and staff - to raise morale amongst participating staff and develop a renewed enthusiasm for self improvement and interest in new pedagogical approaches.

Staff involved with the project gave these responses during the final internal evaluation:

“Students are investing in their learning, taking the teacher out is the ultimate investment. The more students are involved, the more engaged they become, the more they learn.”

“It teaches them more than just the subject, but the skills they need to succeed in other subjects, in life.”

“There isn’t much space for risk in lessons. This was risky, but we’re taking a bigger risk with our students by not going down the competence route.”

“Students respond more positively when they feel they have had some input.”

A further objective was - to record and evaluate the effectiveness of using the tools of a theatre director to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

We were looking for good mutually beneficial, working relationships between teacher and lead Creative Partner. From the internal evaluation:

“Having an outsider helps, it gives a different perspective.”

"I never thought about sight-lines before. I was having trouble teaching in the classroom I was in, but Ashley helped me do things differently."

"If you have a consistent partner presence in the classroom helps. We normally only get lectures from leadership, OfSTED or judgmental observations."

"I could take a step back, look into what was going wrong."

There is also little doubt that most teachers achieved their own personal objectives for the project.

Similarly the students who had been interviewed and tracked gave their feedback. These quotes come from students who were involved in the final stage of planning the lesson with their teacher. "

Yes, my enjoyment of lessons improved, I was more interested in what was going on."

"It was fun because we chose a little bit of what went on."

"We should meet (with teachers) once a week to plan (lessons)"

Anecdotally, the teachers also reported that in each class where the students planned the lesson other students asked if they could have their turn.

However, although most responses were favourable, and the new approach improved engagement, it was clear from some student's answers that their experience of teaching was mostly un-creative. When asked to give examples of creative lessons; word searches, crosswords and drawing posters were given.

A comparison was also made of the effort scores that pupils had been given in term one to those they had received at February half term. It was surprising to note that, despite the effort that a lot of these students had put into the project, the overall scores when collated together showed no change. However, there was a significant increase in the effort levels shown by the full Yr10 Citizenship class.

IMPACT on Dead Earnest

Ashley and Dead Earnest approach their work through a model of empowerment in which participants are encouraged to recognise, challenge and change their own behaviour. To encourage behaviour change you need to take people through these following stages:

- Pre-contemplation
- Contemplation
- Preparation and planning
- Action
- Maintenance
- Relapse

By encouraging teachers to observe themselves and think about what changes they might like to make we started by operating in the area of contemplation. However, this resulted in little actual change.

When, after Christmas the Project went up a gear, and got teachers to take risks and then to plan and deliver lessons with pupils it moved into the areas of 'Preparation and planning' and 'Action'. There was even some degree of 'Maintenance' in the Peer support sessions. This did result in change, but without further maintenance some of the learning might disappear and result in a relapse back to old methods.

Therefore for the partner it was very interesting and useful to be able to test the above model (used in health initiatives such as quitting smoking) in a different context and to see that the model works.

It was also interesting to test the effectiveness of a 'Forum' theatre presentation as a model for changing behaviour. The immediate responses (e.g. to 'For the High Jump') were extremely positive "The only opportunity we've had to debate 'real' issues as a staff" etc, etc but in itself a performance can only get participants to contemplate change and can't expect to result in much actual change (unless it resonates so intensely with someone that it provides a 'trigger' for action). Therefore in structuring the second 'forum' presentation ("This time it's serious"), Ashley followed up the performance with some practical exercises and planning activities to ensure the benefit was both 'contemplation' and 'preparation and planning'

Therefore certain creative approaches might well enable you to recognise that you could behave in a different and possibly better way, but that contemplation doesn't in itself result in change. It takes support in preparing & planning, taking action and maintaining the momentum, which in a school context has to come from within the school itself. At AGS the best model for this was seen to be a peer support approach in which teachers observe and support each other in improving their performance.

Furthermore the project lead to other discoveries about 'engagement' that can be taken into other areas of work (e.g. flow and Gallup's 12 questions on engagement).

IN CONCLUSION

As the project was shaped by a research question (What happens to enjoyment and engagement in learning when students and staff use a creative approach to work together to plan and evaluate lessons?) it warrants an answer. So what can we say happened to enjoyment and engagement in learning?

It is safe to say that enjoyment and engagement in learning did increase. We have some evidence for this from both teachers and pupils

1. The students involved in the planning and preparation said that they enjoyed it
2. Other students in the class asked for their opportunity to run the lesson.
3. The effort, across the class, of the students studying GCSE Citizenship significantly increased after involvement in the project
4. One EAL student from the Yr10 Citizenship class, who ran the lesson, was subsequently recognised as working on a higher level and moved up a class
5. The teachers and LSAs on the project also reported that they found the experience rewarding
6. The teachers had already started planning how they would get other students to run the class.

However, we shouldn't overstate the benefits nor promote the idea of pupils planning the lesson as a major factor in making learning more enjoyable and engaging. Indeed the findings of the project were felt more profoundly in another area.

5x5 on the surface offered a straightforward model for thinking about the enjoyment and engagement of staff and pupils alike. It aimed to work with the teachers to make them feel more engaged in teaching in order for the results to filter down to the pupils. However it also begged questions of how we are able to measure this trickle down effect and whether being more engaged does actually result in better exam scores in the school. We were unable to answer these questions, but what we were able to see is the benefits of non judgemental lesson observations and peer support. Although the trigger for teachers changing their teaching methods was contact with the creative partner, the only sustainable means of encouraging more creative approaches to teaching is to set up a system within the school. There is already a wealth of techniques and skills that staff can offer and can learn from each other. Therefore, a peer support approach that positively encourages new ideas and then evaluates their effectiveness seems to be the obvious way for the school to take the project forward