

Case Study 16: Discussing Room for Creativity

Ellon Academy, Ellon, Aberdeenshire

This case study describes some creative community projects and challenges some of the limitations placed on the development of such experiences by curriculum expectations.

Ellon Academy is a large comprehensive school serving the town of Ellon and its immediate hinterland in Aberdeenshire. The school is characterised by a feeling of real care for the people involved in the school community and the work of pupils is valued with prominent displays of projects. Careful attention has been given to ensuring a welcoming feel to the school with sympathetic thought given to seating, recreational and other working and assembly areas. The school's strategy, 'Promoting Education at Ellon Academy', makes the assertion that everybody has the right to education and the school actively seeks the involvement of pupils as partners in achieving its objectives.

The seven staff members of the Art department, and Bill Smith who leads it, have given 159 years of their combined total of 178 years of service to the school. As members of a department expected to demonstrate high levels of creativity in learning and teaching they are well placed to comment on the priority that they see creativity having in today's education system.

Creativity is not something we have addressed as a whole school matter. This debate is something which needs to be generated or it will always fall to the expressive arts departments to carry that flag. This is inappropriate when creativity in so many other areas is possible and needs to be further developed. We need to fire a shell at the educational system because I feel we are not doing it well enough. I really feel strongly that this is the case.

Bill Smith, Principal Teacher of Art

Management in the school is sensitive to the pressures of delivering the targets for academic excellence and curricular change that have a high priority in today's educational agenda and it tries, with the help of staff, to offer a broad and stimulating educational experience to pupils.

I think I might have left teaching in some despair if it hadn't been for the present school management who have given us space, scope and support – this is critical. The high level of trust and operational freedom we get allows us to make progress.

Bill Smith, Principal Teacher of Art

The determination to do the best for pupils and equip them for life is echoed by David Cordiner.

What are we here for if it is not to assist pupils to gain confidence for life and to be able to exploit their creativity? I don't see my main function as to teach art or churn out expert artists. I see it as really to

help to open people's minds to the situations, which will allow them to make the most of their own future. I am here to facilitate, to help pupils create what is in their mind's eye.

David Cordiner, Senior Teacher with a whole school responsibility

The Art department has a good reputation of achievement of high standards and is valued by pupils.

I could have gone to one of two schools. I visited both and chose this one. I liked the climate of this department. It was open-plan in design, well resourced and had a good atmosphere. I get on fine with the staff. All are different, all know what they are talking about and have been here a long time. It is laid back in here – it is not formal, it is easy to approach a teacher. There are other departments where I would find it more difficult to ask questions and I would feel embarrassed and would pass on without asking. I might even drop out of the course. Here I can ask for help. It is considered the sensible thing to do. It is not a problem to have difficulty or make mistakes.

Joanna, S6

The department consciously tries to involve pupils in taking responsibility for their own learning.

Our courses here are designed to encourage people to look, to see, to think, and to do! We also encourage pupils to listen, to hear, to understand, and then to act. I try to design the work to relate to these outcomes. An example might be where we look at amenity or development planning issues or where we have peer-group appraisal of pupils' work. In lots of other activities there is also scope. Pupils working on design projects have significant choice and go about research in their own way. The best do this very thoroughly; others need more advice and stimulation. For example, a pupil doing a graphics project may make a logo for a company. She/he has to do the research, take photographs, talk to people, look at competitors, take ideas back to the company, get a letter indicating the company's preference, and finally produce the finished design.

Bill Smith, PT Art

The department and its staff play an important role in the life of the school. Bill Smith and his colleagues are involved, as are many staff from other departments, in significant school events, for example charity work, fund raising and ventures such as a two-week outdoor adventure camp open to all pupils. There are annual induction courses for new year groups at S5 and S6 that present significant opportunities for the school to heighten the expectations of pupils as they face the challenges of a developed curriculum and offer enhanced responsibility in the life of the school and its community. One of the S5 induction courses recently focused on the built environment of the town. The Art department devised the course.

The built environment is very important – it is fundamental, we live in it. It seems to

me that it is important that children are really aware of it and we have a responsibility to ensure that pupils realise that they have power to influence the environment. In the senior school this is a component of the Higher course. We deal with it by doing study trips to different towns, walkabouts and lectures on architecture. We look at problems in the built environment and discuss planning and the local impact. Basically I ask them to think about what they see and question what is proposed. It is not enough to accept that because someone is an architect or a planner what they suggest is necessarily the best answer. Most planners have no training in design and yet they pronounce on it. We demonstrate this by presenting pupils with examples of the badly designed buildings found throughout Scotland.

The department has tackled this as part of the S5 induction courses, and at two- or three-year intervals have staged a series of exhibitions of good practice, presenting excellent examples of planning and architecture from throughout the UK. These are funded by Ellon Heritage Trust. They exhibit the exemplars of good and bad practice in several locations including the school, community centre, and hotels, with the object of generating local debate and media coverage. The response is normally excellent.

The built environment induction course is designed to introduce higher order skills like time management, team working and enhanced research. I give some introductory information on the importance of architecture and set a simple brief to investigate the local built environment. The pupils then have a five-day period in which to investigate the architecture and amenities of Ellon. They are left alone – that is part of the exercise. They can use the resources in the art department, such as cameras, video cameras and other materials, and reference works from both the library and the department. The department arranges for them to have photographic films developed immediately. Planners and architects are invited to the plenary session to discuss reports.

The contribution of this exercise, and others within coursework, to local debate on planning issues has been significant. For example in one project, consideration was given to looking at a local hotel which was a visual eyesore. The pupils produced various ideas for an upgrade and engaged professional advice for the sketch designs. Proposals were estimated at £1.5 million – clearly out of the question! Further consideration of low-cost alternatives produced the suggestion that simply improving the external colour scheme would help considerably. A letter was sent to the management of the hotel group enclosing the pupil projects and comments. The hotel group responded favourably and eventually accepted the low-cost pupil solution, which was a simple redecoration of the building.

Another time, a departmental focus on signage brought similar action. The project looked at the issue of commercial competition and how signs attempt to shout louder than each other, providing visual obscenity on our streets. Pupils discussed the efforts of each shop to outdo the others to attract business. The subsequent project promoted an awareness of the issue, started a real debate in the community, and immediately initiated improvements. One example was the blue and white plastic sign of a local bakery. The pupils challenged the sensitivity of the sign not only to the environment, but also in terms of the image it conveyed of the business. The shop reconsidered and revamped its sign to reflect an 'olde worlde, home-baking' image much more in keeping with the character of both its product and the immediate town centre environment.

On another occasion the department initiated an environmental design project looking at the riverside. There were plans to build a supermarket on a green-field site on the town centre riverbank. The developer proposed local gain in terms of builder investment in the local area, and the pupils countered with a proposal for a linear park through the town. The Art department conducted a survey of the local population, and acting on the support received, pupils drew up a series of sketch designs for a riverside park. The artwork was displayed throughout the town, and again pupils'

ideas attracted a lot of attention. The material was passed to a recently formed Amenities Trust, and the department further supported the project by the donation of funds to the Trust from the annual Ythan raft race (which staff were involved in organising). Eventually the project became a reality when the local council adopted it. The park is now one of the major features of the town.

Of course the reaction from the community to our proposals is not always positive particularly from planning agencies and decision-makers that find being called to account an uncomfortable experience! They do not always like being questioned. This was an important part of the learning experience generated by encountering real world problems in which they have a stake and a commitment. When pupils have their vision directed or focus it themselves they are stimulated and they can illustrate their anger and concern and ask hard questions of the decision-makers.

Bill Smith

The school and department also engages in a range of other initiatives that involve pupils and staff working in close cooperation on real projects for the benefit of the community or for fund raising. These have included:

- a fund-raising day involving the building of the world's longest sandcastle at a local beach. This involved the whole school and the associated logistics of transport, digging, safety and refreshments to enable successful completion of two Guinness World records
- a partnership arrangement with a major oil company, Amerada Hess, to supply pupils' art to decorate the corridors and living quarters of the Triton offshore production facility. Pupils had involvement in the production, mounting and hanging of the works including visits to the installation site on Teesside and production of a poster series for Amerada Hess PR. The project was valued at over £10,000 and the department used the generated funds to expand the art and design IT facility
- a whole school seven-day, 24-hour cycle relay on two fixed cycles 'to the ends of the earth' for school funds
- regular field trips to cities such as London, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Dundee to explore galleries, architecture and conduct design and expressive research
- a school anti-drugs drive allowing pupils from S1 to S6 to engage in expressive or design artwork to illustrate their personal messages on the drugs issue. The work could be 3-D or 2-D as pupils decided. The school then negotiated for space in every ground-floor window in central Ellon. This massive community exhibition generated huge public and media reaction.

Because pupils approached the task in a range of diverse ways there was a considerable amount of dialogue on drug abuse for a much longer time both within the department and the school. This was not the simple poster competition as first envisaged. It was a major educational and communication exercise, and the impact was so much greater.

Bill Smith

There is little doubt that the school succeeds in giving pupils the opportunity to explore their creativity and give it outlet but Bill Smith and his colleagues raise issues that require wider discussion and these extracts from conversations

give these issues a platform for that wider debate.

Pupils should have real responsibility for real tasks. There is difficulty introducing this type of work because of the culture in the secondary school. Whilst in my view there should be more of this type of educational opportunity, there are problems as a result of curricular pressure. There is insufficient flexibility within the system. Teachers are tempted to produce packs which overtake a number of the research tasks. For example, they will read articles and produce synopses for the students and even synopses of the synopses. I cannot support this as it takes away the pupils' motivation, and they become conditioned to the teacher solving all the problems.

During the course of the year there are lots of brilliant opportunities to develop coursework through events like competitions and charities but we can't really respond properly because we are training our pupils to get an A and B pass in Higher and the scope of this does not permit the inclusion of these things. You say 'no' more often than you would want to. Training people to produce a still life is not the same as working in a truly educational way. Look at the quality that you get when the topics are related directly to the pupils' experience.

I would say that reality is when you go out and meet managers and directors in industry. The employers are increasingly looking for the 'extra.' Employers are interested in the experiences youngsters have had and the things young people have done. They want the youngsters who will come up with the ideas which will make the difference, in business and life generally. We are becoming obsessed with the paper qualification statistics. Of course they are important but it is the balance that is wrong.

The reality is that the debate in secondary education is the exam debate. The improved results agenda dominates things at the moment and that has been focused by the recent SQA difficulties and the introduction of Higher Still. We are spending a lot of time assessing and recording and less than we want, and pupils require, in actual teaching and learning.

Our departmental meetings do focus a lot on learning and teaching. An issue at the moment must be that we, as a group of PTs, are perhaps not discussing these wider learning and teaching issues enough. We don't have many meetings now and the ones we do have tend to be more information giving. It wasn't always like this. We used to be able to have dialogue across departments about balance, philosophy and study skills.

For creativity to be delivered in a classroom I must create space and encourage flexibility. For discussion and development to happen across a school there must be a similar flexibility and creation of room for dialogue. There is little space for management to do this at the

moment.

From my point of view as PT art I feel supported. I feel that our management team gives me freedom. Maybe not as much as I would like – but freedom nonetheless. Management does support our initiatives and takes the flak when we take students out of other subjects to study outside school.

I think it is vital that this debate on the place of creativity in education should happen at a national level. What we have discussed would be featured in any staff room in Scotland although I would imagine that in many places people will be feeling too busy with forms and other things to discuss it in depth.

I think that too often there is not the dialogue between departments as to what they are about. These boundaries need to come down. Perhaps PT meetings should be in teaching spaces within departments so we can build up a better awareness of what is going on and as a consequence gain better understanding. I know that my understanding of the pressures within the maths curriculum was not sharpened until we had difficulties concerning release of pupils for art environmental study. I do now understand how maths blocks are interdependent and it has altered my perspective. I need to have that understanding on a wider basis.

The irony is that it is becoming difficult for those who do have the narrower subject only focus to get beyond the tunnel vision because of the curricular pressures we are all under at present. The best hope is for a national perspective.

Once again a number of key indicators of threads for developing and sustaining creativity have surfaced in this case study.

- Extended team working
- Effective role models
- Real value for efforts of staff and pupils
- Real world problems and focus on appropriate and lasting answers
- Real responsibility for decisions
- Risk taking – criticism of community buildings, major events such as sandcastles and a drug awareness exhibition
- Community of trust in working particularly with senior pupils

However, the issues raised in staff discussions need resolution within the healthy climate of professional debate prevailing in schools such as Ellon Academy.