

1 Preferred Learning Styles and Creativity action research programme

Introduction

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Learning about Learning arises from a two-year action research programme supported by Creative Partnerships London East involving ten schools and a range of creative partners. The programme ran from September 2003 to July 2005. The resource contains background on the programme and underlying theories; experiences and reflections of the practitioners involved; and a number of tools developed during the programme.

Background

Creative Partnerships London East was one of the first 16 Creative Partnerships areas set up across England. When they were launched in 2002, each Creative Partnerships area was asked to identify a research focus. The London Borough of Newham was involved at that time in the A+ Project – a scheme inspired by work pioneered in North Carolina, America that focuses on preferred learning styles. The A+ Project in Newham paired artists and teachers to develop alternative teaching strategies to cater for the different learning preferences of pupils. The concept of preferred learning styles struck a chord with the members of the newly formed Advisory Group for Creative Partnerships London East and it was duly adopted as the research focus for the area. The programme, entitled Preferred Learning Styles and Creativity, was launched at a one-day event for teachers and representatives from the creative and cultural sector at Stratford Circus in November 2002.

Action research

The decision to base the programme on an action research methodology stemmed from a concern to help schools and creative practitioners learn from their work on learning styles and creativity and use this as a basis for further development. The programme was grounded in an understanding of action research as a process that:

- leads to cycles of questioning, answer seeking and reflection
- encourages open-mindedness and a willingness to consider different views
- helps develop knowledge that can advance creative teaching practice
- encourages a commitment to innovation
- encourages responsibility for professional development

The stages in the action research process within the programme were:

- establishing baselines
- planning activities and strategies
- piloting materials and approaches
- gathering evidence
- evaluating impact
- resolving specific problems and issues
- dissemination
- developing practice

The Preferred Learning Styles and Creativity action research programme

Aims:

- To engage creative partners in a development process that will strengthen the knowledge for good practice
- For findings to be picked up at a whole-school level and integrated into development
- For the schools involved to contribute to the body of knowledge about creative approaches to teaching and learning
- For the schools involved to communicate their experiences to support their engagement with the issues that the programme has addressed

The process

The Preferred Learning Styles and Creativity action research project was led by two consultants, Derek Brown and Paul Howard. The programme spanned two academic years. In the first year, Creative Partnerships London East agreed to support one school in each of the four boroughs in the area. Schools were invited to bid for inclusion in the programme and the institutions selected included a primary school in Newham, a secondary special school in Hackney, a mixed comprehensive in Islington and a boys' secondary school in Tower Hamlets. In the second year, six additional schools successfully applied to join the programme.

All schools were involved in a common core of activity as well as sustaining their own focus. The programme was led in school by the Creative Partnerships coordinator. The common core included:

- **Assessment of learners' preferred learning styles and self esteem** – most schools started by testing the cohort of pupils directly involved in the programme. Some schools extended the testing to other classes/year groups. The results of the assessments were shared with pupils in many but not all schools.
- **Use of the action research framework** – the consultants introduced framework to the Creative Partnerships coordinators in an early training session.
- **Involvement of creative partners** – some schools integrated the action research into Creative Partnerships projects already planned; some designed projects to specifically explore learning styles; other schools had an existing agenda that the action research could support.

- **Involvement in a project group** – a group was formed that included the Creative Partnerships coordinators from all schools involved in the action research programme and members of the London East team. The group, convened by the consultants, met every half-term and shared experiences, challenges, good practice and documentation relating to the programme.
- **Consideration of established research sources** – the consultants presented input on relevant theory at training sessions and provided additional sources to support individuals' specific needs and interests.
- **Engagement with development workshops and training** – the consultants aimed to ensure that all participating coordinators understood the background to preferred learning styles and creativity, the action research process and partnership practice. Training on preferred learning styles for creative partners was somewhat ad hoc in the first year but experience showed that this shared understanding between all partners was highly beneficial. In the second year, therefore, such training was provided more systematically.

The four schools involved in the first year of the research benefited from a higher level of input from the consultants and a research trip to America which also helped to bond the group. Although the six schools that joined for the second year of the programme had less input from the consultants, the four original schools became part of the support mechanism for the six new schools. The introduction of new schools also served to re-energise the programme group and provide more scope for professional dialogue within educational phases.

The programme successfully brought together individuals from schools, the creative sector and Creative Partnerships London East and the consultants to learn, work, create and reflect in a productive and creative learning community.

The role of the consultants

The roles taken by the consultants varied between schools depending on the particular needs of the school and the respective Creative Partnerships coordinator. Typical roles included:

- staff development
- mentoring the Creative Partnerships coordinator
- classroom work alongside the teacher
- supporting teachers with lesson preparation
- development of assessment tools
- preparing staff and pupils for assessments
- analysis of data from assessments
- supporting the evaluation process
- organising the project group meetings

Principal gains

This is not an evaluation document. The articles in this book are mostly reflective narrative although some contain elements of evaluation. The individual and institutional impact has been wide-ranging and sometimes unexpected. It is impossible to list all the gains here but the most common are:

- raising teachers' awareness of the teaching/learning dynamic
- developing teachers' practice which has had a direct impact on pupils' access to learning
- developing a shared language to discuss the learning needs and outcomes for pupils
- developing and embedding systems and policies that embrace the preferred learning styles approach
- enhancing collaborative practice in schools

Factors for success

Collaboration was central to the success of this programme. The collaboration and support between individuals from different schools was initiated through the project group and has led to lasting professional relationships. The headteacher of Stormont House School, for example, describes how membership of the project group provided the necessary support, time and reflection to develop a vision for his school. Collaboration between creative practitioners was also critical; different individuals bringing complementary learning and teaching styles to provide diverse

routes to learning for pupils. The pairing of creative practitioners with varied skills is described by the deputy headteacher in *Digging up a Story* at Lauriston Primary school.

Collaboration between teaching staff and creative practitioners is a maxim of Creative Partnerships practice and was inevitably also a critical factor in the success of the work with PLS. Creative practitioners were able to model new teaching strategies that provided equal access to learning and many teachers felt empowered to adopt these strategies and change their classroom practice as a result. A teacher at Central Foundation Girls' School, for example, describes how her approach to teaching English has changed since the project with Bow Arts Trust.

The programme had a strong formative element (encouraged by the consultants) with the project group often used as a sounding board for challenges and learning. Participants were encouraged to ask questions, to seek improvements and institute change. The combined reflections of the coordinators from Stormont House School and Islington Arts and Media School exemplify this change programme. Assessment tools were introduced at the start of the action research programme but again, improvements were sought and a new tool designed (see Tools section).

A strength of this programme was that it focused on children and young people learning about learning. The Creative Partnerships coordinator at Gallions Primary School, for example, describes how sharing the language of preferred learning styles with her pupils deepened their understanding about their own learning and helped to bond the class. At Bow School, an understanding of preferred learning styles has been used to support students' choices around subject selection for key stage 4 and work experience.

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