# An exploration of digital creativity used to engage and motivate 'hard-to-reach' learners in behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD) schools: a summary

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## July 2007

## An exploration of digital creativity used to engage and motivate 'hard to reach' learners in BESD schools: a summary

A year long project has helped improve the outlook and prospects of many students who have behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD). The project explored how digital creativity activities would impact on pupils and teachers in BESD schools. The project report shows that the effects of access to particular forms of ICT had dramatic results.

There are many examples of learners who improved in different ways. These are just a few.

### Motivation, engagement and persistence

Pupils who had been turned off from learning became engaged, as a result of being involved in activities that tapped into their personal interests and produced 'professional' results. They were proud to present their work to peers, teachers and parents. Headteachers reported increased attendance in classes where pupils were involved in digital creativity activities.

Doug Bone, Headteacher at Wandle Valley School found that project activities encouraged one student, who was not in school, to gradually increase his attendance. "He was reluctant even to enter the school…He was very rude to his mum, very aggressive...We eventually got him to come in to look at the equipment. We had it set up ready for him. He was highly animated by it and wanted to get involved – so much so that we increased his time from one session a week to two sessions a week…This is a kid who was getting no schooling...The other services have found, as an added benefit, that he's more likely to engage with them, so …the prognosis is we'll eventually get him into school," says Doug.

### Personalisation

Pupils took control of their learning with the hardware and software. They suggested activities and asked to use the equipment during breaks, lunch hours and after-school. They created their own finished products, and developed the ideas given to them.

"I am proud of the work I have been doing – every single piece," says T, a pupil at Lady Jane Franklin School. Recently, T's class visited a local heritage centre. He made a picture strip using his own digital images and text about his activities there. "Here, I am pretending to make pizza on a coal fire. This is where I am standing next to this big tank..."

"I've done really well, all on my own without any teachers helping me. The computers are good to use, I just whiz away," explains T.

He feels he has mastered a technique that he will be able to apply to other contexts. "I can do it. I know I can, because I've done it before," he smiles.

## Better social relationships and collaboration

Working together to create animations was another approach to raising pupils' engagement. This also meant that they had to develop people management skills.

For instance, pupils at Wandle Valley School produced the animation, the Green Velvet Club. Many of them have ADHD or short attention spans. They spent hours making their models, sets and lighting and then filming the models' movements – one tiny step at a time.

The production takes a humorous look at an evening at a nightclub. The scene opens with the club staff getting ready for the queue of people to arrive. The person on the door doesn't let in undesirables: "No dogs allowed!" The dog replies: "Woof!"

This was a complex animation in terms of the set, lighting, number of characters and scene changes. "They have made progress by co-operating, because they know they have got to take turns to get the project finished. When they show it to others, they are proud - and so they should be," says Doug Bone, Headteacher.

## Improved literacy

Pupils who had rejected literacy activities became engaged with tasks using the technology.

For instance, Year 6 pupil A had struggled with recognising vowels. His teacher introduced him to animation software and he came up with the idea for Angry Ant, an animation that he produced himself. In the video, the angry ant wears boxing gloves and repeatedly hits a model of a letter 'a'. The letter forms and unfolds in response to the blows. A has since made progress in recognising letter sounds.

His teacher points out that the animation is also a great reusable resource for other learners.

## Personal reflection and developing insight

Animation and music software gave pupils the opportunity to examine the dangerous situations that some youngsters face. Teachers also saw the therapeutic value of using video cameras to encourage pupils' personal reflection. In particular, creating a 'Big Brother diary room' format gave pupils a supportive context to reflect on their lives.

In another example, S a Year 11 pupil, created her own website and produced a weblog (as a part of her GCSE studies) to the diary of Anne Frank. "Her story

fascinates me because it reminds me of me. She liked to get attention from people she likes and that sounded like me and made me smile. That's how I was when I was her age." She says it helped her with her history lessons too. S referred in a very personal way about her own feelings in relation to a text that made a huge impression on her.

"Since I have been in this English class I have caught up a lot and learnt a lot. I'm surprised I have done this much work - I never thought I could do this much," she says. "It's really shocking for me!"

S's behaviour report has shown a big improvement and she is preparing for her exams.

## Continuing education and employment

Young people who took part in digital creativity activities had raised aspirations. The process encouraged some pupils to continue their studies with post-16 education.

At Wandle Valley School, teachers used movie-editing software to engage a pupil who had been involved in graffiti painting, which had caused him trouble with the law. He soon moved to making a documentary about urban culture. This has had a profound impact on him. His school attendance, which had been poor, improved. He feels the digital creativity resources helped him develop his portfolio for further education colleges.

Headteacher Doug Bone says that the spin off of the project has been that pupils have completed their examinations. "Some young people this year are getting 8 GCSE examinations, because they have been using the materials to support them…"

## Embedding digital creativity across the curriculum

Digital creativity activities took place across the curriculum, which gave pupils opportunities to be inventive. They were engaged with areas of the curriculum that were seen as difficult or which weren't viewed as subjects that would lend themselves to technology.

For instance, using several software packages, A, a student at NRHG used sound, pictures, writing and movement to support his learning of Spanish - a subject he found difficult. "I made a movie. It's called 'Me gusta, No me gusta'… 'I like, I don't like'… I like pizza. I like Coca Cola but I don't like sausage and I don't like witches. That's my movie."

The movie helped him communicate meanings in a way that would not have been possible with pen and paper.

## Impact on teachers

The teachers found pupils' positive reactions to digital creativity to be highly motivating. They recognised that pupils' skills sometimes rapidly outstripped their own. They found ways of celebrating these new talents. They also felt that more training would be beneficial in using the more sophisticated aspects of the technology, recognising the innovative pedagogical strategies it offered.

## School impact and sustainability

The support of senior managers is essential to sustainable practices. While resources were provided by the project, a school contribution in the form of space and time was essential to make those resources useful. Towards the end of the project, there was commitment to sustained digital creativity in the form of extending the schools' investment in equipment.

## Background to the project

In June 2006, Becta commissioned a study to investigate ways in which the creative use of ICT might contribute to the education and interpersonal needs of children with BESD. Becta funded development and research (D&R) activities conducted by the Centre for Research in Primary Science and Technology (CRIPSAT) at the University of Liverpool.

The Children's Plan (2007) pointed out that children are often at the forefront of changes in technology. This project set out to see how technology might be used to improve engagement, stimulate young people's imagination, and harness creativity for learning.

## Objectives

The project set out to:

- explore the experiences of ten BESD schools as they trialled digital creativity activities that followed the examples of pioneering work by New Rush Hall Group
- provide evidence of the impact of digital creativity on pupils' behaviour, attitude, learning and attendance and on teachers' practices
- use the evidence to support teachers' development of further pedagogic strategies, exploring practices that might be used in BESD and mainstream settings.

## Recommendations

The researchers recommend that all future educational policy documents should make reference to technology as a key component in any future education policy.

The project report calls for further action to:

- produce material from this project as a professional development package in co-operation with other agencies
- provide hosting and support for a community of practice to encourage teachers to share ideas
- explore further applications of digital creativity and training needs. The potential for 24/7 access and links with the home could produce high dividends on investment and is consistent with Government policy.

This project demonstrated that digital creativity offers powerful means for learners to express their interests and creative energy in educationally productive ways.