

Gemma Price

## **Digital Media and Society: Creative Learning**

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Significant changes have swept the globe since the last half of the twentieth century, affecting political, economic and social spheres, following two World Wars, the rise and fall of both fascism and communism and the ensuing unrelenting spread of globalisation, which have left the disintegration of traditional values and belief systems and a growing sense of fragmentation and loss of identity in their wake. Young people are particularly vulnerable in what is now considered post-modern society, not least because, taking the British education system as an example, traditional education systems and learning approaches appear to be failing increasing numbers of school leavers, who have “desperately low expectations, narrow experience [...and] limited skills” (Creative Partnerships 2005: *The Philosophy of Creative Partnerships*), and are thus disadvantaged in society and the increasingly competitive job market upon leaving full-time education.

In an attempt to counteract the poor performance of British schools, with the National Audit Office concluding that they are “[failing] a million pupils” (BBC News 2006: *Schools Fail A Million Pupils*) and that there are 1557 poorly performing establishments in England alone (BBC News 2006: *Education Heads Reject ‘Naive’ Audit Report*), and to reduce the growing proportion of young people left excluded and struggling in both school and the local community, efforts have been made to make the national curriculum more accessible to a wider range of pupils with the introduction of practical, work-based options. More recently however, attention has turned to incorporating creative learning into the curriculum, and digital media, in particular digital filmmaking, are playing an increasing role in this evolution.

As the search for viable methods of improving education has coincided with rapid advances in the technological arena, signalling the advent of accessible, low-cost digital media, certain questions have arisen as regards the role of creative learning and digital media in education and society. Through the consideration of Creative Partnerships, a government implemented scheme, which has been influential in promoting creative learning, and the projects undertaken in the Bristol area involving digital filmmaking, it may be possible to assess the impact of both creative learning and digital media on education, young people and society in general, in addition to considering the possible effects this area may have on the film industry itself.

Firstly considering the creation of Creative Partnerships, the aforementioned difficulties facing young people in part prompted the conception of the scheme, coupled with the floundering education system and need to tackle the subsequent poor behaviour in both the classroom and extending to the wider community. A need to re-engage pupils in

## Gemma Price

academic life or equally providing those not at ease with the traditional academic route with viable alternatives that could lead to careers also contributed to its creation. Another influencing factor is the fact that traditional methods of teaching have reached a point of stagnation at the advent of the new millennium and the rigidity of the national curriculum has stifled creativity. It was therefore felt necessary to “animate the national curriculum” (Creative Partnerships 2005: *About Creative Partnerships*). Organisers of the scheme have indicated however that the objective is to improve problem areas specific schools have with aspects of the curriculum, without providing an overhaul of or “distraction from the 3 R’s” (Creative Partnerships 2005: *The Philosophy of Creative Partnerships*), the fundamental tenets of the curriculum aimed at teaching reading, writing and arithmetic. The poor achievement of pupils appears to foster an environment of negativity in which they have little prospects for the future, and it is believed that this has far-reaching consequences, with delinquency and social exclusion increasingly afflicting society.

In order to tackle the aforementioned issues significant changes clearly needed to be introduced in the educational sphere. Having examined the reasoning behind the initiative, it is necessary to consider how it was initially founded, in order to prepare for a further analysis of its development and functioning, particularly concerning digital media.

As the scheme is a government-initiative, the first sixteen areas to partake in it were thus chosen by a team of government ministers in 2000. Due to the high correlation between the extent of educational difficulties experienced by schools and pupils, and the level of social and economic precarity and geographical seclusion, the selected areas were chosen “according to indices of multiple deprivation, taking into account cultural, coastal and rural isolation factors” (Creative Partnerships 2005: *The Philosophy of Creative Partnerships*). Bristol for example is afflicted by particular issues relating to specific cultural and economic factors such as the inherent tensions of a growing multi-cultural city and isolated areas, whereby for example, one teenage boy had never ventured into the city he lived ten minutes from and on a trip organised through Creative Partnerships believed he had reached London upon arriving at Bristol Hippodrome (Carole Sartain: see appendix a). Initially twenty-five schools from each area were selected to take part, with pupils ranging from five to eighteen years of age (DCMS: *Creative Partnerships*).

Although originally intended to be a pilot scheme running from April 2002 until March 2004, the project has since expanded, increasing the potential for its work to influence more individuals, schools and potentially the national education system, whilst simultaneously augmenting its prospective impact on the British film industry. A further two phases have been added to the programme. Up until October 2005 over 5000 schools had participated in collaboration with over 3,500 creative practitioners, involving more than 30,000 teachers and 392,265 pupils, with 643 projects developed specifically to involve parents in the creative processes (Creative Partners 2005: *Facts and Figures*). At present, 36 areas throughout England are engaged in the scheme and it has been decided to continue the project through government funding until 2008, leaving the possibility for further continuance thereafter (Carole Sartain: see appendix a).

## Gemma Price

Such an endeavour undoubtedly requires substantial funding that has thus far been provided by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), both having committed over £40 million. In total, the government has provided around £151 million to the project, organized through the Arts Council England (Creative Partnerships 2005: *Funding*). Each area supplies funding to individual schools to buy the necessary equipment and employ creative practitioners to organise the projects undertaken.

Before considering the role of Creative Partnerships with specific regard to Bristol and digital media however, it is necessary to briefly examine the overall functioning of the scheme. It is managed by the Arts Council England through a National Director based in London. Within each chosen area a Creative Director and Local Partnership Board produce Delivery Plans in order to assure the management of the projects taking place and the organisational processes that set these projects in place (DCMS: *Creative Partnerships*).

For the introduction of creativity into the national curriculum to occur, the organisers aim to “establish genuine collaborative partnerships” (Creative Partnerships 2005: *About Creative Partnerships*) between professionals involved in the cultural industries and schools, teachers, parents and pupils. Recognising that each school has its own specific problems, Creative Partnerships initiates a process of dialogue between the professionals and schools so that the projects devised cater to their individual learning problems, whether these relate to problematic areas within the curriculum such as science or maths, or to communication problems between pupils and staff (Carole Sartain: see appendix a).

The range of cultural activities incorporated within the scheme is diverse, with pupils partaking in “fashion design, television and radio writing...directing or producing videos and plays” (DCMS: *Creative Partnerships*) to name but a few, offering “the widest range of artistic and creative activity” (Arts Council England 2005: 2). The focus is very much on young people and improving their learning experience, whilst supporting staff and teaching them the necessary skills to allow the continuation of the creative practices after Creative Partnerships withdraws.

In addition to the collaborative efforts put in place through the scheme, research is also undertaken within each area and on national and international levels, not only aimed at evaluating Creative Partnerships and individual projects, yet also assessing the implications of creativity in education and the effectiveness of the media used (Creative Partnerships 2005: *Research and Evaluation*).

Considering the aims of the initiative, essentially Creative Partnerships wishes to contribute to implementing fundamental changes and “invoking shifts in thinking in the wider education system for the longer term,” while improving school performance through the use of creative approaches to learning. As both pupils and teachers are struggling with the demands set by national targets, Creative Partnerships endeavours to provide teachers with the necessary support to improve recruitment and retention and

## Gemma Price

“stimulate whole school change and renaissance in the classroom” (Creative Partnerships 2005: *About Creative Partnerships*).

As regards young people, in the context of today’s challenges, Creative Partnerships aspires to assure that they are “equipped to realise their full potential” (Creative Partnerships 2005: *The Philosophy of Creative Partnerships*). Given that sixty percent of the jobs for nursery children have not yet been created (Creative Partnerships 2005: *i had an idea*), the projects undertaken intend to instil skills comprising flexibility, adaptation and inventiveness to assure that young people will be able to cope in a constantly changing job market, where these attributes will in all probability become vital in the future (Creative Partnerships 2005: *The Source*), particularly given that “modern life [itself...] is subject to unprecedentedly rapid change” (Cropley 2004: 135).

While the introduction of creativity into education is the principle objective of the scheme, there is also a wish to create an appropriate infrastructure in order for the benefits of the projects thus far to continue. As the radical alteration of the education system is stated as an aim, there is subsequently a need to influence policy makers and government strategists to ensure creativity in learning is maintained. Finally, in bringing the community into contact with cultural industries, the scheme is attempting to “[put] the arts at the heart of national life” (Arts Council England 2003: *Arts Council England Unveils its Ambitions for the Arts*).

In order to assess the impact of Creative Partnerships and digital media’s role in society, it is perhaps necessary to consider the projects carried out through the scheme in Bristol, where digital media have figured prominently in many of the initiatives implemented in the area’s schools and where the scheme has significant scope for improving the standards of education, since its schools are presently at the bottom of the league tables (BBC Six o’clock News 11/01/06).

The digital filmmaking projects take place in seven schools, located in particularly problematic areas as regards socioeconomic challenges and isolation, with the production companies Suited and Booted, Calling the Shots, Knowle West Media Centre and First Born Creatives, who have formed a collaborative body called Blueboard, allowing them to support each other and combine their creative efforts (Creative Partnerships: *Digital Media Strand*: see appendix b). The filmmakers occupy residencies in the schools over an eighteen month period, working with staff, students and parents. While several projects will be considered, the following analysis will focus predominantly on Suited and Booted and their involvement with Air Balloon Hill Infants School and its pupils aged between four and seven years of age.

Sarah Strickland and Chris Kemp who run the production company work exclusively with digital media due to its low cost, simplicity and therefore ease in terms of explaining the equipment to both pupils and teachers, and its accessibility (Strickland & Kemp 2005: *Seminar*). They were put in contact with Air Balloon Infants through Creative Partnerships Bristol with the intention of “[enhancing] the school’s already holistic approach to education” (*Caning, Caterpillars and Cleaning Motorbikes* 2005). The focus

## Gemma Price

on fostering conversation is clearly apparent in this case as an initial period of six months concentrated solely on discussion and preparing those involved for future involvement (Carole Sartain: see appendix a). Through this dialogue, the difficulties encountered by the school were identified, and since Suited and Booted have used filmmaking as a means of aiding academic learning and pupil comprehension, increasing the confidence of teachers, who have learnt to use digital filming equipment and to incorporate creativity into their own lesson plans, and as a method of re-engaging pupils and developing their ideas and skills.

The projects created have included making animation films such as the *Caning, Caterpillars and Cleaning Motorbikes* production, made to celebrate the school's centenary year. The pupils used stories told by ex-students and converted them into animation with the advice of both Suited and Booted and animators Joff Winterhart and Tom Stubbs. The pupil's work has also featured on Watershed's website, a media arts centre located in Bristol that created the Electric December venture, an on-line visual arts advent calendar, in which *Caning, Caterpillars and Cleaning Motorbikes* appeared (*Caning, Caterpillars and Cleaning Motorbikes* 2005). In order to improve comprehension of science, the pupils have also used digital media as part of their biology lessons. A decision has recently been taken to allow the filmmakers and pupils to create a short film, as a means of bringing together the skills acquired after a year of working with digital media and giving the staff and pupils a sense of achievement by producing an "end-product" (Carole Sartain, see appendix a). As sustainability is a key facet of Creative Partnerships, an after-school photo club has been formed and as the residency has progressed, the responsible teacher has gradually taken over the club and the filmmakers withdrawn so that there are measures in place to assure the creative drive continues (Carole Sartain, see appendix a).

Other filmmaking projects in Bristol have tackled different issues. Pupils affected by asylum-seeking have been given a voice to express their stories. For example, in an area with a high Somali population, pupils were able to produce digital projects that addressed issues relating to them that were then shown to their parents and community. As Carole Sartain explained, these children were able to interact with the wider community and gain recognition from the elders of their own cultural community (see appendix a).

In terms of evaluating Creative Partnerships, it has proven difficult to assess the impact of the work undertaken, given that often it has had different effects on individuals and individual schools. As regards the digital media strand, it is under current evaluation that will reach its conclusions at the end of January 2006 and has considered "the impact of the creative use of digital media on pupil engagement, attainment and behaviour" (Creative Partnerships 2005: *Research and Evaluation Project*).

Summarising the experiences of those involved however, the overall outcome is decidedly positive. Research carried out by the Arts Council of England has indicated that the introduction of creativity into the curriculum, improves the learning experience (4) and academic performance of pupils, and "can change the way young people see

## Gemma Price

themselves” (4). As regards digital filmmaking, the opportunity for pupils to gain a voice and express their ideas through this medium can potentially improve their self-confidence and development of skills (4), while also contributing to instilling a positive outlook on the future and radically improving their prospects, giving them the opportunity to make professional contacts and gain beneficial work experience (Arts Council England 2005: *Children, Young People and the Arts*: 4).

According to head teacher Simon Holmes at Air Balloon the creative input has “boosted [pupils] in all areas of school life” (Abrams in Education Guardian 2005) and filmmaker Sara Strickland believes that the pupils have improved self-esteem and have through digital media engaged with each other and the wider community (Strickland & Kemp 2005: *Seminar*). An undoubted success has been the network formed in Bristol and the relationships forged on many different levels, from those between pupils and staff, schools and other schools who have worked together within the scope of the digital media strand, between production companies, schools and communities, and young people and their society and professionals. Thus when Creative Partnerships diminishes its role, there is already a “myriad of...networks” to sustain these links (Creative Partnerships 2005: *i had an idea*).

Teacher Jennie Brettell stated that she “returned to school empowered” and pupils have expressed their increased confidence, Dixie-Leigh Nolan explained his experience of war in Bosnia that was subsequently turned into animation, stating that “it was the first time [he] stood up in assembly” (Creative Partnerships 2005: *i had an idea*). The implications for society have become clear, given that pupils have a better schooling experience and the creative approaches have in turn broken down cultural barriers.

There are naturally several negative aspects, for example, some schools were unable to participate due to the lack of enthusiasm from management and because of initial hesitation, some teachers have expressed regret at not making the most of the opportunities provided (Carole Sartain, see appendix a). The Bristol LEA have shown little interest in the scheme thereby removing a source of funding and support for the future (Carole Sartain, see appendix a) and generally the secondary school projects have not been as successful as those in the primary schools, due to the pressures of curricular targets (Carole Sartain) at secondary level. As explained by Chris Kemp, once government funding is significantly reduced in 2008, it will become much more difficult to sustain the level of involvement between schools and professionals (Strickland & Kemp 2005: *Seminar*) and the potential for changing the entire education system is questionable, since only certain schools participate and there is no such similar scheme nationally in Wales or Scotland for example.

In conclusion, it is apparent that Creative Partnerships has achieved a considerable amount in the educational arena and contributed to alleviating the difficulties of young people by beginning to re-engage them in education and society, and by providing them with transferable life-skills and career prospects. As Carole Sartain stated, “this is only the beginning” (see appendix a) and in order for it to attain some of its larger goals it is clear that further developments and expansion are necessary. To secure sustainability, new funding will be required, and in Bristol growing links with South West Screen are

## Gemma Price

creating the potential for this to be achieved. The success of the endeavour also depends on fundamental changes in thinking on behalf of the schools themselves who will need to approach their budgets in alternate ways once funding is withdrawn, Air Balloon have already taken steps to do so by purchasing a plasma screen instead of a new whiteboard in order to display pupil's projects for example (Carole Sartain: see appendix a).

As the initiatives involving digital filmmaking have shown, this media is playing an ever-increasing role in the media industry and society, including the educational sphere. Its capacity to engage people and give voices to those that might otherwise remain unheard is proving it is becoming an invaluable tool in all spheres.

As regards the British film industry, community video has been persistently neglected, yet digital is increasing its reputation due to its high quality (Strickland & Kemp 2005: *Seminar*). The work carried out through Creative Partnerships is supporting the industry in its enhancing of the local sector, yet the production companies are additionally gaining recognition as well as creating the talent of the future. The scheme and digital media are thus boosting the film industry from the grass roots.

In “[daring] to do things that teachers and children might not have done before” (Creative Partnerships 2005: *i have an idea*), Creative Partnerships is making small changes at a local level that may eventually lead to the desired shifts in thinking and education nationally, while the role of digital media in the industry and community appears set to increase.

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Gemma Price

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