

21ST CENTURY LEARNING ALLIANCE

TEACHER FELLOWSHIP

UPDATE REPORT

REACH FOR THE STARS

SHARNBROOK UPPER SCHOOL

ESTHER McQUEEN

MARCH 2010

Introduction

Reach for the Stars is an innovative new programme designed at Sharnbrook Upper School, Bedfordshire, to promote the core values of stretch and challenge, independent learning and student leadership. The programme was awarded a Fellowship grant by the 21st Century Learning Alliance and the following is an interim report on our work.

Reach for the Stars

Students were told from the start that the premise which underpins the programme is the belief that the A* (in any subject area) cannot be taught; instead students must be encouraged to find it this level of attainment within themselves; within their own capabilities, imagination and drive. The work of the teachers at Sharnbrook was to facilitate the learning journey by giving students the autonomy to manage themselves, their time and priorities, and to be accountable for the outcomes of their own work.

“One student in particular had some excellent ideas; he was quiet and not particularly forceful but the other students respected him and by the end of the first session he has been appointed leader, without the matter ever having been discussed.”

- Teacher/Facilitator Steven Turner

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At the core of the *Reach for the Stars* programme was student choice. Students were invited to join the programme but had to commit to the challenges and demands it would bring. Students then had to choose a ‘challenge’ which they would shape and drive in groups. In choosing, they responded to simple prompts rather than some pre-prepared teacher outline. Whatever happened from that point onwards was entirely down to them.

“The fact that we were given complete control was fantastic and made me feel like we were capable of actually creating something worthwhile”

- Sally Felts, student

The Programme

Six groups were formed and each group was assigned a facilitator who would be only act in an advisory role. The expectations of student outcomes were extremely demanding and unfamiliar; they were asked to do four main things: produce some kind of product or artefact; keep a video diary; exhibit their work to a public audience and teach a mini-lesson based on their learning journey. They had just three weeks to achieve all this.

“At first it was quite intimidating and the tasks seemed quite daunting”

- Josh Green, student

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The challenges chosen by the groups were suggested by different teachers across the school to represent the cross-curricular A* skill-set – but without being too subject specific. There were no ‘fixed’ intended outcomes because we wanted the students to determine the direction of the challenge.

“As the students moved around the challenge ideas, there were lots of questions, but few answers.”

Teacher/Facilitator – Beth Crawford

“The panic in the girls’ eyes showed how the independence frightened them, but they also seemed to get a buzz from this freedom...they were excited by it!”

Teacher/facilitator - Beth Crawford

Reach for the Stars Challenges

Group 1: To create a Sustainable environment (SUS = Sharnbrook Upper School)

Group 2: To create a pastiche of Nick Park's 'Creature Comforts' called
'Teacher Comforts'.

Group 3: To report the unreported

Group 4: To create a mini-episode of a crime drama in the style of CSI/Numbers

Group 5: To explore 'The Noughties'

Group 6: To explore the issues of gender achievement at GCSE

During the three weeks, the students' learning journeys took shape and began to create challenges and barriers. Some of the groups didn't get on well, while others did but couldn't reach a decision. Some groups were highly competitive whilst others immersed themselves in the fun and challenge of this unique situation. Whatever the challenges faced by the students, the facilitators stayed in the background. Facilitators made it clear to the students that they were not there to solve problems or solve conflicts. Regardless of how difficult it became for the groups, the students were forced to find their own solutions.

"My experience was complicated. I enjoyed learning new skills but was it fun working with the people I did? Probably not."

- Drew White, student

Student Presentations

After the period of three weeks, the six groups were ready for the teaching and exhibition sessions. A wide public audience, made up of students, staff, parents, governors and special guests, were invited to see the students exhibit their work and share their learning journeys.

All the groups presented their work and delivered their teaching session. Each group presented something completely different; they challenged their audience's expectations and pushed themselves to achieve something unique. The results were spectacular.

As the creator of the *Reach for the Stars* initiative, I watched the presentations and listened to the question and answer sessions with curiosity. I firmly believe that although they talked about their learning journey, they weren't (and still aren't) truly aware of the real benefits; I think that will be realised much later. What was clear was their sense of pride and achievement on completing something with real autonomy.

"I am certain that the students involved in *Reach for the Stars* will use the skills they have gained in their quest for A* at GCSE – even if they don't realise it now!"

Carly Waterman, special guest – Deputy Head at Northampton School for Girls

Interim Conclusions

Now the course is finished, the research goes on and although the students are not aware of it, I am still watching them and still looking for evidence of the impact the experience has had on them. It's interesting that one student said in an interview, "I think it is a shame that we don't get to do anything with our final product; we didn't get a chance to take it to other schools so our pack of materials is just sitting there." I'm reticent about telling the student to go ahead and make contact with other schools, because I would like her to reach that point for herself. It is obvious that, despite the autonomy they have had, they still see the role of the teacher or the course leader as someone who could make something like this happen.

Methodology

The methodology used has provided us with a range of data:

- Filmed sessions of the teaching slots
- The groups' video diaries
- Students' before and after attitudinal surveys
- Student *Reach for the Stars* course evaluation sheets
- Facilitator learning journals
- Feedback from audience members

“I feel it has helped me to develop myself more as a human being”

– Paul Jones, student.

Follow-up

The coming months will provide time for myself and my co-researcher to look through all the data. We are also holding a celebration lunch for the students to get back together, celebrate their learning journeys and providing feedback to the Headteacher about the experiences they had and whether we should provide more opportunities in school like this. We want to know whether the students feel it made a difference to them and why. We will also explore the idea of a delayed impact by re-interviewing students three months later to see if more of the benefit can be realised retrospectively.

“I just think this was a fantastic experience. I learned a lot about myself and how I work best, also how much I can achieve in a small amount of time.” –

Laura Coles, student

Conclusions

There is no doubt that this programme was innovative; it involved risk-taking and a belief in the students' ability to succeed. For these reasons, this has been such a worthwhile and interesting learning journey for me as the course leader and teacher/researcher. As well as gaining a greater understanding about student learning, autonomy and leadership, I have also learned that risk-taking doesn't always feel the way you imagine it to. There are times when I cringed and when I felt judged and under scrutiny; there were times when I had to defend the principles behind the course. The point is that all of this has developed me professionally and has made me more resilient. In running the programme, I have had to face my own challenges and have been forced to experience the same challenges as the students when they were risk-taking, being original and thinking outside the box.

Esther McQueen

Sharnbrook Upper School

**All student names have been changed for ethical reasons.*