



Live the Story

Creativity, Criticality and Active Learning in the English and Media Classroom: A Model.

NATE Chair **Peter Thomas** reports on a project in which NATE, in partnership with the Ideas Foundation, has collaborated with creative media professionals to model English teaching strategies which put creativity, critical thinking and active learning before exam preparation.

‘This is one of the best things I’ve been involved with in a lifetime’s work in English’ is a starter I’ve not used before – and one I’m surprised to be using when the state of English worries me.

I’m talking about a curriculum initiative that grew out of voluntary enthusiasm to stimulate and engage about 400 students in West Cumbria. The *Live the Story* project has been a triumph of collaborative multi-media communication. I’ve been working with several agencies whose common agenda has led to a very productive partnership. I hope the project offers a model to others who share NATE’s concern with the purpose and values of UK English teaching.

Some background

NATE as a professional association obviously cares for the health and welfare of teaching and learning in English. As the English curriculum and ideas about teaching and learning evolve, NATE responds with an independent commitment to values that may or may

not coincide with those of other stakeholders in that evolution, such as Ofqual, Ofsted, the DfE, universities, and the wider public of parents and employers. These responses and critiques of curriculum and assessment are articulated through NATE’s publications – *Teaching English*, *Primary Matters*, *English in Education* and *NATE News*. Further responses have been available to those stakeholders who have sought the view of the association, though recent history has seen major educational change, particularly in English, initiated without reference to the professional associations. Additionally, NATE produces classroom-ready resources for KS3, GCSE and A Level that embody its general principles and priorities.

My own activity, within and without NATE, since gradually withdrawing from a 30+ year role in GCSE design and assessment, has included INSET in the UK, Europe, the Middle East and the Far East. My focus has broadened from specific exam intervention to wider matters of motivation, ambition and the pleasures of language.

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A focus on ‘Reading the world’, combining visual and verbal literacy, is a productive way of transferring focus and skills from visual to written communication. I’ve learned that all abilities of students quickly grasp matters of audience and purpose, symbol & suggestivity, and of cultural referencing, from study of media texts. Additionally, since working with the Ideas Foundation and creative media professionals (e.g., Adam & Eve, Burberry, Nike & John Lewis) I’ve been impressed by their common view that exam qualifications are less of an employability guide than the so-called ‘soft skills’ of empathy, collaboration, resilience, independence and imagination. John Cridland, a past Director of the CBI (not an outfit I had considered on my side) has stressed the need for ‘developing the attitudes and aptitudes which will set young people up for adult life.’

A national context

NATE’s response to the recent evolution of English will be familiar to members and to others. Broadly, it regrets the loss of any English components that motivate and challenge students of all abilities, especially those most relevant to language use in life inside and outside schools, such as media study, study of literature from different cultures, and study of spoken language, as well as mixed-mode assessment at GCSE. It considers that some changes in curriculum and assessment priorities have not been to the advantage of students, teachers or the subject: an increased focus on technicalities at KS2, the contraction of KS3 to rehearsals of GCSE exam-focused protocols, a reduced emphasis on oracy for thinking and planning, and an emphasis on Direct Instruction at the expense of group-work for collaborative learning.

NATE’s view is that, after several years of seeing English limited by external influence, and losing its attractiveness to students of *all abilities*, there is a need to re-assert some basic principles:

- English as a *skill-based discipline* (criticality based on description, analysis and evaluation)
- English as a *humane discipline* – focused as much on the student as on content, with the so-called ‘soft skills’ of creativity, empathy, imagination, collaboration and reflection, and focused on language and communication in society today as well as in the fiction of the past.

Despite well-publicised, politicised claims of a more rigorous ‘world class’ curriculum, and a ‘ratcheting up’ of standards, all is not well in English: the numbers taking A Level English are in serious decline – and *not* because GCSE has become more ‘rigorous’. Whilst some of this may be down to the promotion of STEM, there are other causes. English is based on the variety, subtleties and complexities of language and literature, and of the human attributes engaged by it, meaning the variety, subtlety and complexity of learners and the learning process. These are not reflected in an increasingly limited English curriculum, a narrower focus in testing and a pattern of formulaic teaching resulting in formulaic writing and responses to reading. Much of what used to make English popular – reward for originality and creativity, links to language in the wider world and to other communicative modes – has gone. This decline of English as an A Level choice,

and as a main school source of stimulus, enjoyment and engagement, will continue unless we re-assert two things: the value of the cultural capital inherent in students’ experience and the scope of English for emotional and social development, as well as academic attainment

It is not surprising, therefore, that NATE welcomes Ofsed’s emphasis on curriculum, following from Phil Jarrett’s writings – *KS3 – The Wasted Years?* (2015) and *Moving English Forward* (2012). Amanda Spielman’s warnings about exam-drilling and the need for a deeper, wider KS3 curriculum are timely and apt – if they feed through into a more sensitive and collaborative inspection practice.

Local context: West Cumbria

The West Cumbrian coastal strip, like other UK coastal strips, suffers in teacher recruitment from having salt water as half its catchment orbit. More importantly, it suffers from the decline of former industries and an LEA less affluent than southern or urban ones. Social mobility and ethnic variety are not features of the local population, and the region’s insularity affects the cultural and occupational ambitions of students.

Fortunately, various agencies have committed to making a difference, and this collaboration has resulted in the experience I referred to at the start – the *Live the Story* project – a project that has added vigour and relevance to students’ (and teachers’) experience of English.

Live the Story: a project in West Cumbria

Five schools in West Cumbria signed up following our letter proposing the project. Schools were given a choice of how many and which students would be involved. Judith Schafer, the joint Head of Solway and Beacon Hill schools, decided that if this was a good thing, it was a good thing for all, so opted for whole-school and whole-staff involvement. Millom Community School opted for specialist Media & Photography students. Whitehaven Academy opted for top sets in years 7, 8 & 9. Silloth Primary opted for Year 6, as part of its transition project with Solway Community. The teachers involved and the six Canon volunteers were given twilight training over four days a fortnight in advance.



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The Live the Story Project

The Live the Story project partners

The agencies involved in this educational initiative were local, national and international.

Sellafield was for a long time the biggest employer in West Cumbria, but as it gradually decommissions it is committed to preparing the community for an alternative employment future where enterprise and digital fluency may be key features. It also has a brief for environmental care. The Sellafield partner was the STEM Ambassador Joanah Macababbad.

Cumbria LEA has been keen to support curriculum development, particularly at KS3, funding a year-long curriculum project in one of its Notice to Improve schools. Rachel Laverack, its general adviser, organises regular day conferences for English teachers, usually with an input from NATE.

The Ideas Foundation is a charity supported by the creative industries dedicated to promoting diversity and opportunity in those industries, and in developing creativity in schools. The IF and NATE have worked

together for 18 months, producing a media-focused KS3 study package ('Creative Persuasion') free on the NATE website, and running courses for teachers with practical experience of advertising processes hosted by the agencies. The IF partners were Heather MacRae and James Follows.

NATE has an obvious interest in anything that develops creativity and criticality through language and literature in schools, and is particularly concerned to develop and disseminate good practice in teaching and learning. The NATE partner was Peter Thomas.

Canon is a global brand, producing reprographic equipment. It uses Canon Ambassadors to develop its digital reputation in education, and supported the project financially and by lending top-class digital SLR cameras – and one free to each of the schools. The Canon partner was Clive Booth.

Adobe is a global brand dependant on future digital communication, so is making its state-of-the-art, industry-standard Spark software free to schools. The Adobe partner was Phil Badham.

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The Live the Story programme

1 Introduction

a) UN Sustainable Development Goals: Heather's session established the idea of international co-operation to make the world a better place. The 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a good basis for engaging students with real-life issues affecting their own future. Students of all abilities have plenty to say about global warming, pollution and gender equality. We chose to focus on the matter that David Attenborough has so eloquently addressed – the environmental effect of plastics.

b) Photography and Me: promoting enthusiasm and creativity as routes into a career, Clive's intro session charted his progress from school through graphic design into freelance photography, working with international brands. Graphic movie footage of work in the Arctic and filming RNLI rescue training in gale-force high seas, winched up to a helicopter, in a gale, for aerial shots, was a strong message that personal skills can lead to exciting and fulfilling work. I was particularly impressed by his account of a tent break-in by a polar bear which scooped 144 packets of biscuits.



2 Carousel of practical sessions

a) **Powerful Images:** my own session began by showing ways in which visual composition combined suggestivity with cultural references, using a collection of brand logos. Students looked at simple logos incorporating a brand name (e.g., Ford & Landrover), then others which relied upon purely visual recognition (e.g., Audi & Toyota). The power of logos to embed themselves in public consciousness was demonstrated by showing a small part of a well-known brand logo.



Getting students to design their own logo and slogan yielded rich results in a short time, with success unrelated to students' academic ability. This was a very productive exercise in something not often done in writing in English – choosing words for a maximum three to five-word text.



The last part illustrated the language of persuasion in longer texts, with a writing task based on assertive, suggestive or consensual strategies. Students were given a choice of strategies to work with based on the psychological appeal likely to work with different people:

- Conscience: *guilt at wrong-doing due to faith or values*
- Economics: *debts, costs, investment*
- Morality: *greater good, conquering evil*
- Patriotism: *what's good for the country – history & heritage*
- Posterity: *future generations*
- Practicality: *effects of inaction, effects of action*
- Reason: *intelligence and knowledge*
- Responsibility: *for planet, future, family or community*
- Self-interest: *security, happiness, welfare*
- Survival: *individuals, species*

Once students had chosen a strategy (or a combination of two or three strategies), I suggested some purposeful ways of developing the strategy, with examples of the sort of phrases or sentence starters that might be useful for a quick start five-minute writing burst:

Promise

- By this time next year you could be...*
- Have you ever dreamed of becoming...*
- Be part of the answer, not part of the problem!*

Reassure

- Of course, you think you don't have the ...*
- Hundreds of other people like you have...*
- Don't be held back by your...*

Advise

- All you need to do to get started is...*
- The first thing to do is...*
- My top tip for a successful start to...*

All this was fairly standard English preparation for the practical groupwork later. What gave it extra spin was wrapping it with the digital input, the digital outcome, and the talk and group activity.

c) **Composing pictures:** Clive's session showed more to digital literacy than pointing a phone camera at something. He demonstrated three compositional choices in making a photographic image – light, angle and background. He showed how a subject looks different by using warm or cold, direct, bounced or diffused light, and high and low and wide angles for POV. This established simple ways of working with a lens without mentioning exposure, f/stops or other technicalities. It was, without saying so, a compositional model superbly transferable to writing: focus, angle, selection, context, message.



d) **Composing stories:** Phil's background as a former English teacher means he knows exactly how digital technology helps teachers and students. His session illustrated original or template construction of an Adobe Spark poster with graphics and text, exploring match of font and colour to audience and purpose. Then with the same principles, he modelled creating a story with Adobe Spark video, adding music or speech. Again, visual sequence and structure were transferable to writing.

3 Creative group-work on the brief

The practical carousel sessions set up students for the creative task – working in groups on the brief to publicise the plastics menace to the planet. Setting off up to 100 students for an hour-and-a-half finding material and locations around school to photograph could be a nightmare, but I have rarely seen so many students – of all abilities – sustaining purpose with such a focus on the craft of communicating. (My slogan – Top Joy!)

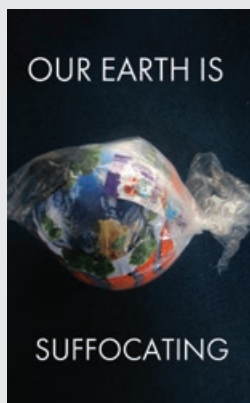
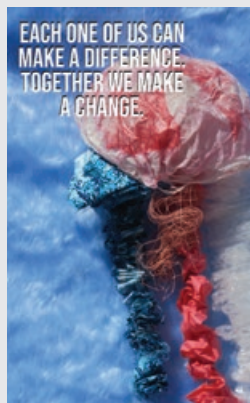
Groups of 4 or 5 had an hour and a half with a DSLR camera to create images to load onto Adobe Spark. This required finding locations and props, shooting, choosing lighting, basic editing, uploading and adding internet-sourced images, speech and/or music. Groups divided roles, with some as performers and others as recorders or directors.

What was striking was the degree to which collaborative talk was crucial to planning, deciding priorities, choosing effects, selecting and rejecting alternatives, matching choices to audience and purpose, allocating roles, negotiating differences, evaluating what other groups were doing and maintaining task focus within the time frame. It was a fine reminder of the importance of process talk for learning ... and life.



4. Showcasing

The end of the day was a celebration of the results – many of them judged by Phil and Clive to be worthy of professionals. We plan an exhibition of the work later at the Whitehaven Museum.



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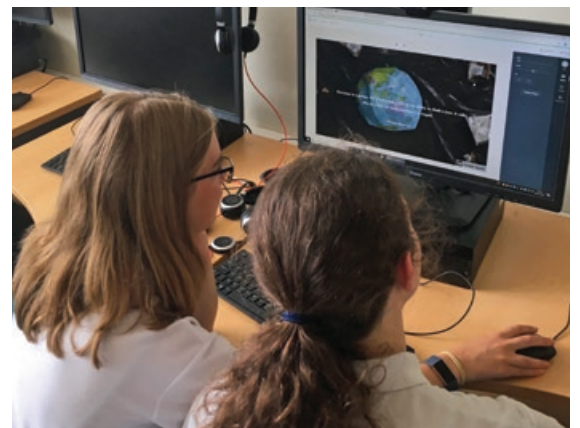


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Evaluating the project

All the schools reported favourably on the motivation and performance of their students – frequently mentioning the active involvement of some normally reluctant students. Clive’s website and email gathered dozens of messages from students wanting to photograph polar bears or dangle from a helicopter.

Student feedback was very positive. 75% of students said they feel more positive about their potential. 83% said they feel they can now apply creativity in new ways. Teacher feedback, too, was very positive. All of the teachers responding thought the project increased the confidence and team working skills of their students. 83% of the teachers said the programme increased staff understanding of the relevance of the skills being taught:



- Finally, a CPD session where I have learnt something that I can use.
- It was good to see so many normally indifferent or switched-off students motivated and involved.
- I was inspired by the linking of creative technology and a current issue.
- Great project! Impact on students has been to make them think about their environment.
- Today was amazing. The children loved learning how to use the cameras and working together.

And finally ...

IF and NATE look forward to the next stage in the project, in Cumbria or elsewhere, depending on funding partners. Thanks to all who took part – especially Heather MacRae, the indefatigable IF organiser and visionary who set up the project.

Peter Thomas
is Chair of NATE