Appendix 8: Teacher Reflections

Teacher A Reflection:

I feel the OTLA project has positively impacted the way I approach delivering the creative prose writing of the GCSE English course. This unit is often met with learner frustration, as many have a fixed IQ mindset and lack confidence in their own ideas due to having 'failed' previously. The learners often comment on how this part of the course "won't help me in real life," and they struggle to recognize the importance of creativity in building confidence and empowering them to express their thoughts and ideas without judgement. Therefore, in the past, I have lacked confidence in promoting the usefulness of the skills built within this unit, with limited links to the working world. However, the OTLA project has highlighted to both the learners and myself, the importance of freewriting in building confidence and resilience whilst reducing self-doubt and the fear of being judged. Learners have been able to recognize the value of their voices and ideas, accelerating their progression.

I often stick to a detailed, rigid Scheme of Work in my teaching practice and am very aware of the limited time we have to deliver a condensed, fast-track GCSE curriculum. Often, I fixate on 'sticking to the plan' so as not to disrupt this. Instead, the OTLA project has forced me to drift from the curriculum. Initially, I felt uneasy about this, and, early on, was impatient to see results. However, shortly after, I recognized the changes that were seen not only on paper but in the learners' physical and emotional reactions to the creative writing element of the class. Many learners were excited to see their freewriting books and quickly writing with little hesitation. This newfound habit enabled them to write without the dread of my marking pen. This gave them a creative outlet and reinforced the power of their written voice, with some creating detailed descriptions, others reviewing their favourite characters and scenes on television and some forming emotive diary entries about how they were handling personal conflict, including a mother's cancer battle. Over time, learners developed their writing skills and grew in confidence, enabling them to later create original plots based on fictional conflicts. This journey was made possible because of the project's deviation from the rigid curriculum, thereby encouraging me to recognize the need to move away from the curriculum constraints at times, as the skills-building focus has had a greater impact on learner progression.

The action research project entailed us participants meeting with the Project Lead at a monthly lunch meeting. Here, we have shared our observations, feedback, challenges and strategies to further enhance our teaching practice. Since returning to full-time classroom learning after the lockdown restrictions, the team have struggled to find opportunities to meet. The project enabled us to re-establish a collaborative community again, something I personally struggled without when homeworking and delivering online. We were honest in our frustrations, such as the limited impact the project could have on sporadic attenders, and celebrated our classroom wins, sharing uplifting anecdotes on the progression we were seeing in typically resistant learners. I have truly appreciated how the project has brought this proactive collaboration back to our English department again through the time dedicated for a community of practice to meet regularly.

Finally, one of the earliest lessons learnt in teacher training is the importance of teacher reflection. After lessons, I often critique my own delivery internally, making amendments and future plans to better meet learner needs; however, I focus purely on my own criticisms and am guilty of overlooking the learner voice. The OTLA project has reinforced the need to collect learner feedback regularly and encourage them to offer their suggestions on how the delivery can be better tailored to

their individual needs. When collating learner views on the impact of the project, learners enjoyed having their voices heard and offered their own suggestions on how the project could further aid their progression, including making links to their personal aspirations and current issues. I will take this forward into my teaching practice, including opportunities for regular learner feedback to boost motivation and highlight the importance of the learner voice in the classroom. Fundamentally, learner-centeredness is key to boosting confidence and combatting the fixed IQ mindset.

Teacher B Reflection

Freewriting Action Research Teacher B Questionnaire Feedback March 2022

1. Do you feel that participating in the freewriting project has had an impact on your teaching at all? Yes / No

Yes.

2. If so, in what way?

- *I have become aware of the importance for the learners of taking time to write without an assessment objective or a target in mind. This has had a positive effect on their attitudes towards writing and therefore has made it more enjoyable for me to plan and set up.*

- *I have seen the importance of "small wins" such as increased volume of writing or increased confidence to share ideas due to the removal of rules and heavy structure.*

- *Taking the time out of each session has provided a structure to lessons the learners find comforting, it has become clear to me that repetition is important to them and I have sought to keep other elements of my teaching within that session consistent too.*

3. In your opinion, what were the benefits (if any) of working on an action research project?

- *I have increased my understanding of the barriers to producing creative stories for SEND learners. This has made me more confident going forward.*

4. In your opinion, what were the drawbacks (if any) of working on an action research project?

NA

5. In general, how do you feel about teaching story writing?

- *It's difficult to stay motivated to teach story writing when learners are so disengaged and negative about all aspects of story writing/creative writing.*

6. Has the project made an impact on the way you feel about this aspect of your teaching? Yes / No

Yes.

7. Will you approach the writing aspect of the course any differently now as a result of what you learned from the project? Yes / No

Yes.

If so, what aspects of this project would you consider retaining for your future teaching?

What would you change?

- Introducing the creative writing early on in the year to show progression over a longer period of time.

- Encouraging the 'share' activity in order to encourage learners to feel more comfortable sharing ideas generally

Teacher C Reflection

One of the main benefits of the OTLA action research as a teacher is that I have gained a greater insight and understanding into my learners as individuals that I don't think I would have accessed otherwise. Whilst this doesn't necessarily have an immediate direct impact on delivery, or teaching and learning, it has made me more sensitive to issues they may have going on outside of the classroom that is then impacting on their behaviour and work ethic in the classroom, and I can respond more appropriately to that. In some cases, it has encouraged positive working relationships with learners, as I shared some of my own personal responses to the prompts that created an environment where they seemed to feel safer with sharing their own responses.

In terms of the impact on story writing, I would say that it has provided some prompts/ideas for them to consider when writing stories that we would not usually have access to, so the argument of 'I can't think of anything to write' is not as relevant and they can look at their creative writing books for inspiration. The prompts and topics we have discussed have also at times lead to fruitful discussions that can also be used as inspiration.

The project has made me reassess my own methods of delivery and approach towards learners who do not immediately respond to the task at hand. The concept of a 'free space' for thinking without intervention regarding behaviour or motivation has been successful in some cases, as some learners do need more reflection and thinking time before starting to write, but the constraints and timescales of the course in general do not always lend themselves to this, and the project has provided a space for this. It has been worthwhile to observe their behaviours during this period and to further understand the significant draw of distraction and phone use and the impact of this on their motivation.

In addition, having a space where learners can write freely in an English class without judgement, particularly of their ability in spelling, punctuation and grammar, seems to have encouraged some of them to produce writing where otherwise they would not, however limited an amount. The idea of a specific, 'special' book in which to write freely worked well in terms of creating boundaries between that time to write freely, and the rest of the lesson.

The project seemed to develop organically in terms of prompts, as some were more successful than others, and I tried to gauge week by week which were proving the most fruitful in terms of getting learners writing. Sometimes this challenged my assumptions about what worked best and demanded more flexibility of me.

One of the difficulties is the constriction of the curriculum and timetable in terms of the limited time we have available with the learners. However, as the activity in itself did not overtake lessons in terms of the required curriculum delivery, and it was directly linked to the narrative writing objectives, it did not feel like an 'unnecessary' departure from what we are required to teach.

On reflection, the main weakness has been that the free writing and valuable idea collation has not

always translated into full story writing, which was one of the main drivers of the project. In future, I would try to harness this idea creation more effectively, by setting more extensive tasks that are more focused on incorporating what they have been writing in their creative writing books – for example, adapting story titles that closely match the prompts and encourage them to draw on what they have written. Another lesson learnt would be to provide greater flexibility with prompts, and it was valuable to discuss different approaches with colleagues during our regular meetings – using pictures, asking them to create their own prompts, providing a range of prompts within one session, etc.