

Prospero's Island

An Immersive Approach to Literacy at Key Stage 3

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Prospero's Island is an immersive theatre project created by Punchdrunk Enrichment and supported by Hackney Learning Trust (London Borough of Hackney).

The project sought to inspire and motivate students' engagement with the English curriculum, and to develop an immersive approach to teaching literacy that would improve students' learning.



The Open
University

punchdrunk
enrichment



hackney
learning trust

PROJECT RATIONALE

Prospero's Island was Hackney Learning Trust's (HLT) and Punchdrunk Enrichment's (PE) first secondary phase project. Both partners were concerned about the pressures of the performance culture in contemporary education, the introduction of exam skills in Key Stage 3 and the side-lining of the arts in policy and practice. A reduction in school arts activities is believed to represent a particular risk for socially-disadvantaged students who have little or no access to such experience outside school (The Warwick Commission, 2015)¹. *Prospero's Island* was designed to bring experiential theatre directly into the English curriculum, providing a creative and stimulating approach to teaching and learning. Based on *The Tempest*, the project also supported teachers in developing interactive approaches to teaching Shakespeare: bringing his work to life, overcoming students' fear and resistance, and promoting their active engagement with plot, characters and themes in order to support long-term understanding.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Prospero's Island took place in a secondary academy in Hackney, London over two school terms (Autumn 2014 – Spring 2015). The project was embedded in existing schemes of work, and included the following elements:

- An immersive theatre installation for Year 7 and 8 students (aged 11-13 years); this took the form of an interactive game based on *The Tempest*; over a two-week period groups of students participated in this experience for a morning or afternoon (Autumn term);
- A Teaching and Learning Day (TALD) and eight twilight CPD sessions on immersive learning techniques for school staff and other teachers across London (Autumn term);
- A return to the installation for Year 7 and Year 8 students in a lesson led by English teachers (Autumn term);
- Follow-on work by teachers to develop immersive learning in English lessons (Spring term);
- An independent evaluation of the project (Autumn and Spring terms).



Pupils on a problem solving mission

Hackney Learning Trust runs the education services for the London Borough of Hackney and works with over 400 schools across the UK. With 500 professionals in 24 specialist service areas, the Trust explores innovative and evidence-based approaches to delivering improvements in classroom practice and pupil attainment. We have a particular interest and expertise in initiatives that improve literacy.

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1. *Enriching Britain: Culture, Creativity and Growth*, The Warwick Commission. Published by The University of Warwick, Coventry, 2015.

Punchdrunk Enrichment is the educational and outreach arm of Punchdrunk, an immersive theatre company that encourages audiences to participate actively and creatively in theatrical events. Punchdrunk Enrichment creates work with and for participants in schools and communities. In schools they use multi-sensory installations and immersive narratives, to create fictional worlds in which students play an active role.

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2. *(Syn)aesthetics: Redefining Visceral Performance*, Josephine Machon. Published by Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

THE PROSPERO'S ISLAND EXPERIENCE

Prospero's Island was structured as an episodic game with a quest format. Groups of students entered the 'Hub' – the dark centre of operations (a transformed Reading Room) – to be greeted by the disembodied voice of the 'Games Master' and his three assistants (all PE actor-facilitators).

Over a two hour period the students unlocked the story of 'a storm, an island, and a man with unfathomable powers' by working through seven levels in the game, engaging in text-based activities and venturing on problem-solving missions to areas elsewhere in the school.

For example the school greenhouse became *Prospero's* 'Magic Lab'; a tent on the roof the 'Nobles' Camp'. Each part of the installation comprised detailed artefacts and multiple sensory stimuli, and offered insights into characterization, plot and themes of the play. As each level within the game was achieved, parts of the Hub were transformed to reveal hidden compartments and new spaces with stories to tell. The experience clearly captivated students and provoked their 'dynamic curiosity' (Josephine Machon, 2009: 61)². It provided opportunities for collaboration, problem-solving, discussion, textual interpretation, an understanding of Shakespeare's language and the development of student interest in and knowledge about *The Tempest*.

The teacher-led return to the installation was framed as literacy, with a more explicit focus on widening vocabulary and a sense of trajectory towards the written assessment.

EVALUATING THE PROJECT

The evaluation was undertaken by an Open University-led research team. It investigated the value and impact of the project, focusing on:

- students' attitudes to and engagement in English;
- students' writing;
- English teachers' pedagogical practice.

The evaluation focused on the experiences of Year 7 (11-12 year old) students. Data were collected from the whole Year 7 cohort and, at a greater level of detail, from 18 case-study students within three focal classes. Case study students included a gender mix and reflected diversity within their class and across the year group, particularly in terms of ability. The evaluation combined quantitative approaches (measuring changes to students' writing and their attitudes to and engagement in English) and qualitative approaches (looking in greater depth at activities carried out in the installation and in English lessons, and students' and teachers' responses to these). Data analysis covered:

- Year 7 students' performance in writing tasks, completed before and after their participation in *Prospero's Island*;
- Year 7 students' attitudes to and engagement in English before and at the end of their participation in the project;
- Observation of three focal classes' participation in the *Prospero's Island* installation and follow-on English lessons;
- Detailed information from/on case-study students;
- Detailed information from English teachers working with the three focal classes;
- Information from participants in CPD sessions, and from HLT and PE staff involved in the project.

THE IMPACT OF PROSPERO'S ISLAND

Impact on students' attitudes to and engagement in English

- Data from the Year 7 cohort indicates that the whole immersive experience impacted positively on students' motivation, engagement and learning in English;
- Case study data indicates the *Prospero's Island* installation created a sense of 'awe and wonder', inspiring students' curiosity and imaginative engagement;
- Teachers of focal classes commented that the participation levels of lower-attaining or normally disengaged students were particularly positive in the installation;
- Case study data indicates that teachers' later utilisation of immersive elements in English lessons enhanced students' enjoyment and motivation. Students noted that the use of music, pictures and objects, problem-solving and collaborative approaches were effective in supporting learning and engaging their interest;
- Reflecting on the immersive experience as a whole, teachers commented that students showed increased interest in Shakespeare and literature, confidence in lessons and willingness to volunteer suggestions or take creative risks;
- Case study students commented that the immersive experience had expanded their concept of literacy; promoted a sense of ownership of their learning; empowered them as active learners;
- At the end of the project there was some improvement in Year 7 students' general rating of 'English' and 'writing'; however ratings were not significantly different and were difficult to assign to the project alone.

Impact on students' writing

- Case study students reported that *Prospero's Island* provided a powerful and inspiring context for writing and enhanced their eagerness to write; they commented on having more ideas for writing than usual, being better able to imagine the scene and empathise with characters, and enjoying writing more;
- Teachers of the focal classes observed an improved attitude towards and confidence in writing amongst students;
- The analysis of case study students' scripts shows that many were able to write convincingly about the perspective and feelings of the play's characters;
- Evidence from scripts indicates the project prompted students to use advanced vocabulary in writing;
- Impact on writing scores was more complex. The majority of Year 7 students improved their scores by one or more sub-levels. There were differences between classes, however, and a significant minority did not improve. Figures need to be interpreted with caution as many of the gains above are not easily measured by standard assessment criteria, and factors other than the immersive experience may also have affected performance.

“ When we were studying the *Tempest* and we had to write as Miranda, I was so into the writing that I carried on a few minutes after we were supposed to stop. Before *Punchdrunk*, it was kind of hard to imagine the situations and atmosphere. Afterwards, everything got easier. We did these good things to boost our knowledge about *The Tempest*, cos you can't really learn everything by reading books.

Year 7 Student

“ When I was writing in Ariel's shoes, I was actually using lots of descriptive words, so going back to the immersive experience, I used lots of words from that much more in my writing to help.

Year 7 Student

“ When we're reading the book, Miss says, 'Try and imagine how it looks', but when we went to the *Punchdrunk* we could actually imagine how it was.

Year 7 student

“ What I found the most impressive was watching students who generally are either disengaged or have behavioural problems and them just jumping in.

English Teacher

“ Everyone was on task, the ideas they were coming up with were better than I expected. It's almost as if the room takes over and they become quite intrigued by everything!

English Teacher

“ After the *Punchdrunk* debrief in the library, the group is sent to accelerated reading support (for those with reading difficulties). Instead, one boy goes to the Shakespeare shelf, finds three different copies of *The Tempest* and urgently seeks his teacher's advice re suitability. He discusses the options with her and then checks out one copy.

Researcher's Observation

Impact on teachers' pedagogy

- Teachers of focal classes felt they had started to make changes as a result of the project, although this was seen as just the beginning of a professional journey;
- The teachers reported an enhanced understanding of immersive learning and teaching;
- Teachers also reported using, in English lessons, a wide range of stimuli directly linked to the project, including images, music and artefacts to develop inference and deduction skills and inspire written work; this was confirmed by researcher observations;
- Teachers had begun considering, as a future activity, the transformation of their classroom space to support students' learning;
- Teachers' focus was more on the adoption of specific techniques than on the development of a distinctive and principled immersive approach.

The longer-term implementation of immersive techniques will necessarily face a number of practical challenges: time constraints, assessment pressures, the requirement to focus on more structured support for students' writing, behaviour management, as well as teachers' need for continuing guidance and support.



Pupils examining the map in the 'Hub'

RECOMMENDATIONS

The evaluation indicates that *Prospero's Island* made a positive impact on the Year 7 students' attitudes to and engagement in English, afforded inspiration for their writing and vocabulary, and began to influence the teachers' pedagogical practice. It also afforded a rich opportunity for active engagement with Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

In order to enhance the value and longer-term impact of the project it is recommended that *Prospero's Island* is fine-tuned to offer a trajectory of support for teachers, to help maintain momentum and embed key principles. HLT's knowledge and understanding of educational practice created an effective bridge between PE and the academy that hosted the project; from the outset their involvement was pivotal. In future iterations of immersive projects such involvement will be important. Specifically it is recommended that future partners, individually and collaboratively, consider:

- Developing a shared understanding of immersive teaching and learning;
- Supporting teachers to observe and document students' creative engagement;
- Increasing the time set aside to plan, support and embed follow-up work within the curriculum;
- Sustaining the joint CPD and TALD offer and providing complementary CPD on working in role;
- Constructing criteria to counter the assessment emphasis on technical/organisational features of writing;
- Creating artefact boxes to support immersive practice;
- Maximising the use of social media during and after projects;
- Exploring the learning principles and educational potential of alternate reality gameplay;
- Examining the scope for student agency with immersive practice;
- Planning lighter-touch immersive projects within school schemes of work;
- Supporting teachers as action researchers of their own immersive projects;
- Creating in-school evaluation procedures.



Pupils working on a comprehension task

“ Case study data indicates the *Prospero's Island* installation created a sense of 'awe and wonder'.

Impact on students' attitudes to and engagement in English

“ I believe that the impact on students was a love of Shakespeare. It made English fun and they saw literature in a new light, there is an excitement around English with my class.

English Teacher

“ They made it exciting, like we didn't know what was happening and it was a mystery.

Year 7 student

Photography by Paul Cochrane

The full report is available at <http://oro.open.ac.uk/45467>

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