

# The Sheffield College: the Young People Speak Out blended learning course and the Hip Hop Digital Sounds and Creative Writing course

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**Valerie Petersen**, English Lecturer  
**Kate McCullough**, English Lecturer  
**Matt Hine**, English Lecturer

## 1. The organisation

The Sheffield College is a large college of further education serving the whole of the city of Sheffield on 3 main sites. The curriculum was developed by the English online staff at the city centre site which has an extensive vocational programme and students coming from a diverse multi-cultural background.

## 2. Overview

The Young People Speak Out (YPSO) course is a blended learning curriculum that fuses technology, popular culture and student experience to re-engage disaffected young people in literacy and build their key /basic skills and confidence. This in turn has led to improved thinking and understanding skills. The course has won two national awards for blended learning, including an AoC Beacon award and has been presented at the AERA conference in Montreal.

The course has now become an integral part of the literacy and pre-GCSE English provision at the college and has been very popular with both students and staff. Retention and student achievement have improved. Staff have developed their confidence and skills in ILT. The curriculum has successfully been piloted in schools within Sheffield and the curriculum team have been asked to write a new unit especially for use in schools.

The Hip Hop literacy course is an offshoot of the YPSO course and engages young people in lyrical composition and creating digital sounds, along with providing areas of social and cultural development and exploration. The Hip Hop course was also presented at the AERA conference in Montreal, and is currently being adapted for piloting in the schools in Sheffield.

### 3. Details

#### Approach

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The approach of the Young People Speak Out course is student-centred, with young people's experiences at the heart of the curriculum. The literacy skills that we teach are embedded into the course. We take a thematic approach, with topics that are of relevance and interest to young people: for example Home and Homelessness, Views on Violence, Music Magazine, and Rap and Poetry. We blend traditional teaching, e-learning and popular culture as a way of engaging students who are often disaffected by traditional literacy classes. The aim is that students will be motivated to do a GCSE class in the future, and some of the materials can be used as GCSE assignments. The students gain a national literacy qualification at the end of the course.

The Young People Speak Out is a blended learning course that is available fully online or in a paper-based version. Students can work online directly into the materials or choose to write into the paper booklets. The course is delivered face-to-face in the classroom with discussion being an integral part of the curriculum.

The Hip Hop (Beats, Rhymes and Life) course came about partly through the work of the blended learning team, along with close collaborative work with a performance group of students from the US. The course was designed to attract learners who may traditionally reject formal education, by giving these learners the opportunity to create their own music and explore a culture important to them. Our central aim was to hopefully bring these disenfranchised learners into college, and provide paths for progression back into formal education.

The course is delivered face-to-face in the classroom, with much of the discussion material available in booklet form. The majority of the work takes place on PCs, as learners construct their own beats and rhymes while going through the process of producing and recording their sounds. We hope to develop the students' IT skills through the music production, the literacy level through the composing of raps, and a development of cultural understanding through the social studies aspects of the course.

#### Scale

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The Young People Speak Out course was piloted in 2003-4 with 9 classes of up to 18 students taught by English teachers. Since then it has been delivered across the other two main centres of the Sheffield College and piloted in 5 schools, including 3 secondary schools, 1 special school and an inclusion unit.

Beats, Rhymes and Life was piloted in 2004-2005 with 2 groups of around 10-15 students and ran as an evening session. This arrangement meant that the learners had to show their enthusiasm by actually attending college in their own time. Since the pilot, the course continues to run as an evening session, but is now part of the mainstream curriculum, being offered to our foundation studies students as part of their programme of study.

#### Impact

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In the first two years of Young People Speak Out retention improved from 67% to 80%. 90% of our students achieved national literacy qualifications. The feedback from students was extremely positive, many recommending it to friends. 31% said that they talked about the course outside class and 78% believed that topic two was 'interesting'.

During a taped reflective discussion, English teachers delivering the course commented that students got a sense of power during the discussions and that the materials gave an anchor from which to explore themes and topics. They also commented on how delivering the curriculum had increased their ICT skills and developed their confidence in using technology in the classroom.

Staff at the College have now trained schoolteachers in delivering a blended learning curriculum. These school teachers also gave positive evaluations that stressed particularly how the course had given them confidence to experiment with technology alongside paper-based materials, and the way the course integrated quite detailed exploration of language with the exploration of themes relevant to the students.

Other curriculum areas within the College now want to develop a blended learning curriculum.

The Beats, Rhymes and Life course has had a real impact on the students involved. Many of our learners remained in college, now taking courses within the mainstream curriculum. Students have re-integrated with the traditional college environment, seeing areas for their own progression and development which they may not have considered previously. Some of our learners have gone on to achieve at GCSE level in English, with some moving towards A-levels and GNVQ qualifications in media and performance.

Young People Speak Out is an effective and engaging new curriculum for Entry level and Level 1 literacy that has become an integral part of the English programme and has motivated both staff and students. To date three specially equipped blended learning rooms have been set up to deliver the course.

Through the pilot project with schools, an ongoing working relationship has been established involving a creative exchange and the development of new curriculum that will act as a bridge for students between school and college.

Along with an integration into the mainstream curriculum for both the learners and the course, the Beats, Rhymes and Life course has seen a real investment on the part of the college in terms of providing equipment that will allow the learners to get the most from the course. Another important development has seen some of the learners being able to submit their raps as part of their GCSE English coursework. This has required close conversation and discussion with the examining boards as to the value of the lyrical compositions of the students and the value and importance of rap culture generally.

### **Costs and benefits**

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In order to design and write the course, a team of English teachers, basic skills teachers, a designer and administrator were given time to develop the curriculum. In addition we needed the cost of a web design company to build the templates for the online materials. Three blended learning classrooms were equipped with computers and an interactive whiteboard. Paper booklets had to be printed. Funding came from Objective 1. (The evaluation was an NRDC project.)

An essential part of the success of the course was the time for training and development for English staff delivering the course. This partly consisted of some training in the use of IT but, more importantly, gave staff time to reflect on and discuss the different parts of the course and to share their experiences, so that the course could be fine-tuned in the future.

The Hip Hop course required an initial outlay for the production software and AV equipment required. However, once purchased, we are going to be able to utilise these resources for at least two more years.

## **4. Lessons, caveats, and implications**

e-learning and blended curriculum development needs to be properly funded. In this case a creative approach through the establishment of a working team that included a mixture of teaching and design skills and administrative support led to a successful blended learning curriculum being written and delivered. Staff do not need to be expert with computers, but do need training and support initially in delivering a new curriculum.

The Hip Hop course has illustrated how utilising the students' own knowledge base and interests is an important way towards re-engaging disenfranchised learners. While learners must take some responsibility for their own progression, offering a point of access that is less formal or traditional could provide the same success we have seen at the Sheffield College. The innate knowledge of these learners, in terms of ICT and cultural awareness, leads to a classroom approach where learning is often shared by tutor and students.

## **5. Contact details**

Valerie Petersen [valerie.petersen@sheffcol.ac.uk](mailto:valerie.petersen@sheffcol.ac.uk)  
Kate McCullough [kate.McCullough@sheffcol.ac.uk](mailto:kate.McCullough@sheffcol.ac.uk)  
Matt Hine [matthew.hine@sheffcol.ac.uk](mailto:matthew.hine@sheffcol.ac.uk)