

Book review

The creative college: building a successful learning culture in the arts

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(ed.) *Graham Jeffrey*

Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books, 2005.

This book of 165 pages consists of a series of chapters that profile and contextualise the New Vlc 6th form college in East London. This dynamic institution was created in 1992, in one of the most deprived boroughs in Britain, in order to offer education across a range of areas. However, from 2002, the college specifically concentrated on developing: 'a set of arts education practices that unleashed creativity through working collaboratively, focusing on the needs of individual students, and a curriculum that made use of a complex web of intra-organisational resources' (XV).

It is this distinctiveness and innovation which is the focus of the book, and the New Vlc offers a model of post-compulsory college education that raises intriguing questions about what arts education in an inner city sixth form college should be like and serves to stimulate debate about a range of educational topics. These topics include how far work-based learning in the arts can be used for social empowerment and how artist practitioners should best act as educators. The book itself is a mix of case-study and informed theoretical discussion, rather than a scheme of work to follow, though this is not say, that there is not much information of practical use to others.

There are probably several groups of readers among educationalists and arts practitioners that will find this book of interest.

1. Those interested in the different ways post-compulsory education can interface with deprived local communities. 2. Those interested in more community based and vocational alternatives to traditional, practical arts education. 3. Those interested in the possibilities for implementing substantive changes in the relationship between learners and teachers on the one hand, and traditional arts and work based learning in the creative industries on the other. 4. Those with a specific interest in the current theories of 'communities of practice' and 'situated learning' derived from the work of Lave and Wenger and which the New Vlc 6th College seems to embody.

The book begins with a foreword written by the college Principal, Sid Hughes, and is followed by chapters that address a range of pedagogic and more technical issues, as well as the history of the college between 2002 and 2004. Lucidly written, the book is more than a set of case studies as chapters draw upon a wide-ranging set of educational literature. In chapter 1, Jeffrey locates the relevant debates about the value of creativity in education for young people that lay behind the college's experimental model of education. In chapter 2, Jeffrey examines the student demographics and characteristics of Newham College, which helps explain the strategy the college chose, as well as the attitude of the team of artist educators. Chapters 3 and 4 are detailed case studies. Chapter 3, by Kelly Davidson and Rachel Fell, explores BTEC first Diploma students and how they reacted to the college's distinctive ethos and method of learning, while chapter 4, by Jo Parkes, examines a large scale, two

year, collaborative student project, *Home*, and what it achieved for the students. Chapter 5, by Jeffrey, considers the ramifications for the work of the college in terms of a renegotiation of two identities, those of artist and activist teacher, while Chapter 6, by Andrew Blake explains how the college became productively linked to Stratford Circus, a developing cultural quarter in Stratford for professional artists. The final chapter, by Jeffrey, chapter 7, draws the diverse material into a set of conclusions and reflections about why the college's non-traditional way of linking work, creativity and the arts matters from an educational perspective.

The Creative College provides an inspiring, fascinating and well-informed account about innovative educational work that chimes with new developments in theories of work-based learning and the growing importance of the creative industries and illuminates the subsequent impact that these topics may have on educational practice. I did feel that in the generally positive tone of the collection of essays, there was a tendency to be unconcerned with possible problems, nor is there an evaluation of this form of learning against more traditional forms of arts education. I also wondered just how far the skills that students evidently gained through the projects had been manifested in their later working and educational lives. However, none of this is to gainsay the value of the book, which will provide much food for thought in the current educational climate.

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