

# Branching Paths

by Brad Gyori and James Pope

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## USING DIGITAL INTERACTIVE STORYTELLING TO ENCOURAGE MARGINALISED YOUNG PEOPLE TO ENGAGE WITH CREATIVE WRITING

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### ABSTRACT

This paper reports upon the Digital Interactive Storytelling in the Community (DISC) project conducted in the Faculty of Media and Communication at Bournemouth University, UK, in May/June 2022. This initiative was run in collaboration with Dorset Combined Youth Justice Service. The event was part of ongoing research and practice employing digital creative writing to stimulate collaboration and critical thinking for learners who might not normally have access to digital tools or feel motivated to try creative writing. In this iteration of our work, the participants had disengaged from learning and had committed minor offences leading to court orders or cautions. Our project enabled them to write, design and produce a digital interactive narrative and publish it online. This paper outlines the process employed to implement and evaluate their creative and analytical work. It also references and builds on the scholarship underpinning our ongoing participatory research. We analyse the completed work and the participants' reactions to the project, identifying five key pedagogic strategies that may aid other educators designing and running similar collaborative learning initiatives. They are: *de-risking autonomy, flexible scaffolding, modular instruction, behaviour modeling, and role reinforcement*. We discuss each of these proposed best and consider how they may enhance the engagement of previously disengaged learners.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on a community-based project undertaken by the authors and other members of the Faculty of Media and Communication at Bournemouth University (BU) in May/June 2022, in collaboration with the Dorset Combined Youth Justice Service (DCYJS). The project builds on previous community-based events, which we call Digital Interactive Storytelling in the Community (DISC), involving young people who typically might not have access to digital tools or feel motivated to try creative writing (Gyori & Pope 2019,

2021). Our belief, substantiated by previous projects, is that creative writing using digital tools can be stimulating, engaging, and often inspiring for reluctant and/or diffident learners. In this case, the participants were teens under the supervision of DCYJS, subject to court orders or police cautions for minor offences. We and DCYJS hoped the project would spur enhanced self-esteem and encourage a return to education. Drawing on Participant-Centred Learning techniques (Barnes, M. 2013, McCombs, B.L. 2006, Robinson, V. 2011), we supported them to design and produce an interactive digital narrative and then publish it online. This narrative featured many types of media including written text, film, sound, and photography.

The finished narrative can be experienced at: <https://genarrator.org/view/b236rksn6olygbgc>

The overarching aim for this and the previous iterations of the DISC is to offer digital-interactive storytelling to a diverse community of learners, as a means of creative expression and critical engagement. Our research questions were:

1. How can we ensure effective experiential learning occurs when participants are creating interactive stories?
2. How do participants learn from each other and from mentors when creating interactive stories?

From its start in 2016, this scheme set out to explore modes of student-centred learning that could empower participants to take charge of the creative process. The learning process we have designed affords participants a high degree of agency in the collaborative creative process. It allows participants to operate within the affordances and constraints of a dynamic, semi-structured learning experience that strives to effectively capitalise on their interests, while challenging them to develop new competencies and build on established skills. This process helps to foster the confidence of

participants, enhancing their ability to communicate effectively and work co-operatively with others.

For each iteration, we have chosen to work with learners who are disadvantaged or reticent in some respect: at-risk and/or unemployed teens; secondary school students with little interest in Higher Education; and young offenders. We have been pleased to discover that participants tend to respond well to our non-traditional learning design.

While we have learned a great deal about project participants and how best to offer them rewarding experiences, we have also been highly concerned with the learning process itself. Specifically, we are interested in innovating and refining strategies for experiential learning in the context of co-creating digital interactive stories. We hope that some of these strategies will be of interest to other educators who would like to achieve similar results with disenfranchised and otherwise indifferent learners.

Creating interactive narratives can encourage participants to think analytically about the consequences of pivotal life-choices. Interactive storytelling features many cause and effect relationships. A story-player is offered a series of options. Upon picking one, she is directed down a path toward an outcome tied to that choice. In the case of our 2022 DISC, we were working with a group of young offenders, who chose to focus on the topic of bullying. The young men participating in this co-creation activity drew upon personal experiences to craft a narrative that allowed them to think through potential pro-social and anti-social responses to this type of harassment.

Below, we describe and analyse our latest DISC and refer to the scholarship underpinning this work and its production. We also provide evidence, in the form of DCYJS education officer Sarah Preece's report on the project, of the participants' reactions to their involvement in the DISC. We organise our discussion around some of the learning strategies that have emerged through our work. And finally, we offer some tentative conclusions around the effectiveness of our approach in engaging this group of participants of varying abilities and attitudes and suggest opportunities for further project development.

## 2. BACKGROUND

Based on previous successful digital storytelling events, and related research and pedagogy (Pope 2006; 2009a; 2009b; 2010; 2013a; 2017), the software platform Genarrator was used here to build the narrative. The DISC also exploits Gyori's experience as a television writer-producer, education scholar, and interactive story practitioner (Gyori, 2013; Gyori 2016; Gyori & Charles 2017; Gyori 2019).

Participants in previous iterations of DISC created stories that focused on areas relevant to their lived experiences. In 2016, a group of at-risk teens affiliated with the AIM (Assessment/ Intervention/ Moving on) Project focused

on internet "catfishing." Two iterations at the Bishop of Winchester Academy (2018 & 2019) allowed secondary school students to think through a variety of complex topics including racism in sport, domestic violence, sea pollution, and mental health issues (see Gyori and Pope 2019, 2021).

## 3. PROCEDURE

Working with vulnerable and marginalised participants presents a variety of ethical challenges. For the 2022 DISC project with the young offenders, we chose to work on Bournemouth University's Talbot campus, in the Faculty of Media and Communication, for the first time. It took place over six days, split across two working weeks. We designed the entire structure of this iteration in collaboration with the DCYJS staff who felt that a full week without a weekend break might prove too demanding for the participants. DCYJS felt that the university environment, along with the use of professional media studios and equipment, would be a positive motivating factor for the participants. We followed our institution's ethical guidelines, submitted risk assessments, and were supported by DCYJS case workers throughout. Those same case workers were the most outspoken advocates of the project, frequently remarking on the enthusiasm of the participants engaging in the collaborative process. Also, following their advice and building on our previous experience, each day was organised around specific tasks, with breaks for coffee and lunch in the main refectory building. Here is the day-by-day structure:

**Day One:** introduction to the project, the nature of digital interactive storytelling, story ideas, and story plotting. This includes the need to make a story map (Fig. 1) which is used as the template for building an interactive narrative with branching paths.

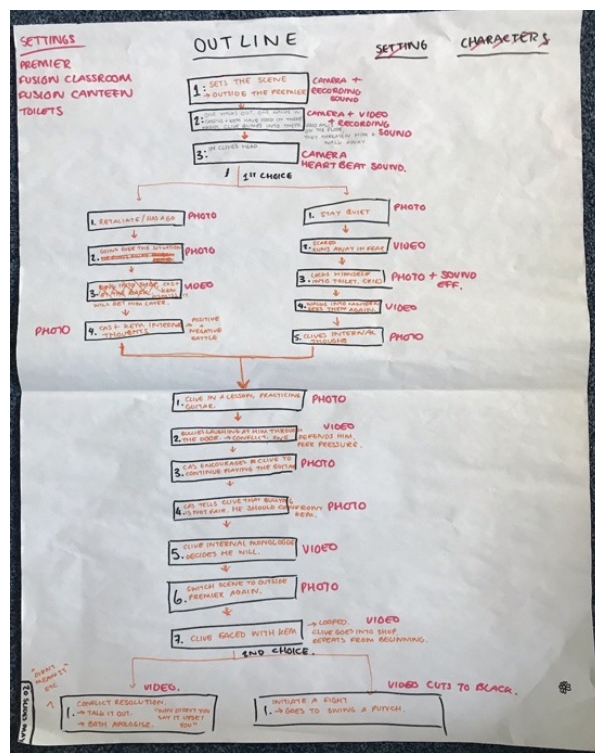


Figure 1: Day One story map

**Day Two:** refine story map (Fig. 2); begin filming and photography on campus

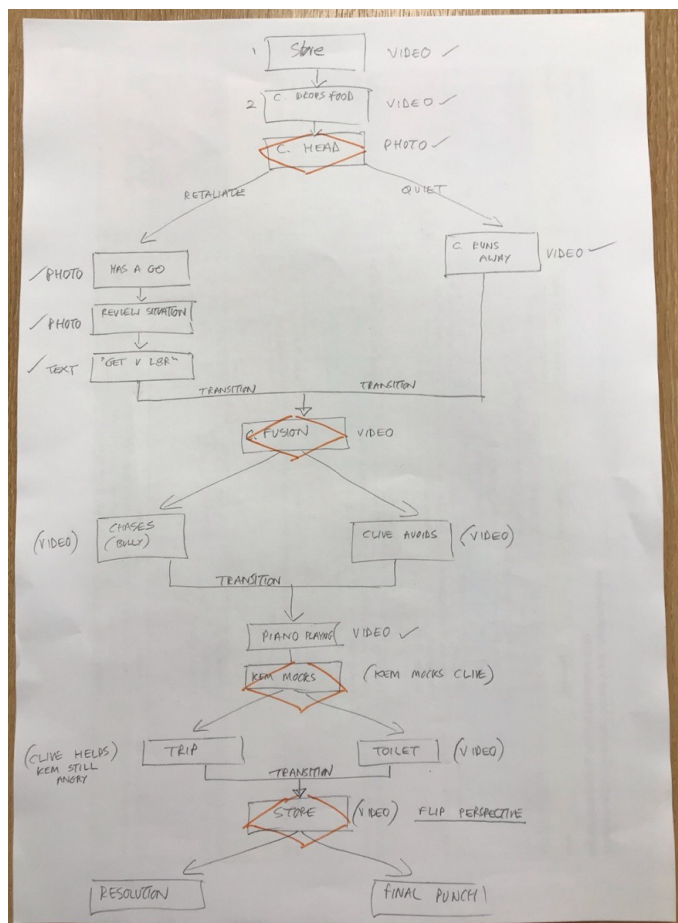


Figure 2: Day Two refined map

**Day Three:** filming and sound recording, including sourcing and editing copyright-free sound effects.

**Day Four:** finish filming and sound work. Post-production editing. Begin to build the narrative in Genarrator.

**Day Five:** complete Genarrator build and test the working narrative.

**Day Six:** presentation of the working narrative to families, faculty staff, and DCYJS staff.

## 4. METHODOLOGY

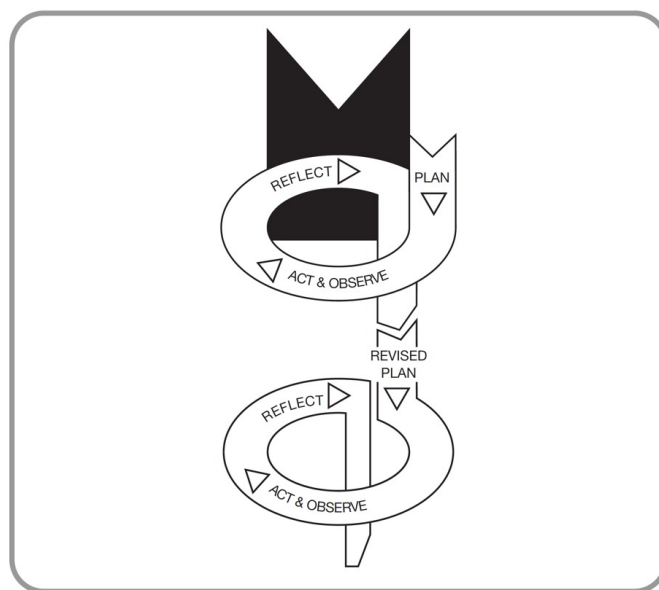
### The Project Participants

The participants were all male, aged 14 to 17, who we will call by the pseudonyms Ben, Jay, and Marcus. These young men were selected by DCYJS who felt they would cope with the structure and demands of what was quite an intense working period. The case workers also felt participants had a good rapport with one another and were open to the idea of working on a sustained collaborative project. We found this reassuring as the three proposed participants were subject to court orders or police cautions: "When out in the community, the boys had committed offences where they were in places they should not have been, or influenced by others, behaving unsafe or even dangerously" (Preece, n.p).

The project team was composed of James Pope (project co-ordinator, and scripting), Brad Gyori (scripting and video), Saeed Rashid (photography), and Jason Hallett (sound). We also recruited two final-year undergraduates from the faculty, Megan Caswell and Emma Keeley, students who had experience of using Genarrator to make interactive narratives. These two acted as mentors and production assistants throughout the project. We have found that including younger adults helps to create a sense of team cohesion and aspiration as the young participants relate more easily to them (Gyori & Pope 2021). Project supervision and overseeing care of the three participants was provided by DCYJS education officer Sarah Preece and careers advisor Kirsty Reed.

### Action research

We employ an Action Research approach (Koshy 2005; McNiff 2013) to note and assess the strengths and weaknesses of each project.



The Action Research "spiral" (Koshy 2005: 5)

Action Research has been chosen as an underpinning model for all our DISC events because it offers a practicable and valid framework for the kind of situations we work in, where the realities of the event location and the abilities and sensitivities of the participants must be central to our thinking and planning.

### Action Research in Practice

Because it is easily adapted to collaborative projects, we opted for the Action Research model suggested by McNiff (2013). We quote McNiff's (p.105) key stages below. See Gyori and Pope (2021) for further detail of this approach during previous projects.

We review our current practice.

Identify an aspect we wish to investigate.

Ask focused questions about how we can investigate it.

- Imagine a way forwards.
- Try it out and take stock of what happens.
- Modify our plan in light of what we have found and continue with the action.

- Evaluate the modified action.
- Reconsider what we are doing in light of the evaluation.
- Proceed with a new action–reflection cycle.

### *Participant-Centred Learning*

From the outset, the DISC was conceived as a participant-centred learning initiative. Therefore, the key insights that have emerged all reflect a pedagogic approach that promotes autonomy, critical thinking, and high levels of engagement (Barnes, M. 2013, McCombs, B.L. 2006, Robinson, V. 2011). We considered how the learning design influenced participants at the level of the individual (Gee 2003; Yelland and Masters 2005), and the team (Bandura 1971; Schüler 2007). We considered other comparable projects in the field (Botfield et al 2018; Heron and Steckley 2018; Kindon et al 2010; Sadik, A., 2008).

## 5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### *De-risking Autonomy*

A student-centred approach to teaching involves allowing participants to help design their own learning process (Yelland and Masters 2005). However, the young offenders co-creating this interactive story had been known to struggle with issues of social interaction and behavioural regulation. We wanted them to take ownership of the project but to do so in a way that felt safe and productive for all participants and the learning facilitators as well. This meant assuring the participants, especially in the initial stages, that they were welcome to suggest ideas and offer critiques in a safe setting where their imaginations would be given free reign. We refer to this approach as “de-risking autonomy.”

To begin with, no idea, however impractical, was automatically dismissed. Project leader Jim Pope challenged the participants to suggest stories set in imaginary worlds, far off locations or different historical eras. After all, with some images drawn by the participants or selected off the Internet, they could place their narrative in any time or place they could imagine. This type of blue-sky brainstorming allowed the students to relax a bit and realise they were free to take creative risks.

### *Flexible Scaffolding*

When participants are well immersed in a passion-driven process of problem solving they forget they are acquiring skills and forming new knowledge (Dewey 1893). This is the experiential dimension of learner-centred education. Perhaps paradoxically, for participants to feel free to experiment and innovate, they first need a full understanding of the rules of engagement, and these rules must be clear and consistent, an approach that Bruner (2006) identified as “instructional scaffolding.” Scaffolding is the educational support necessary to effectively guide learner-centred learning.

When conducting this project, we noticed the participants were very easily distracted: Jay would sometimes appear

to be so tired that he could barely keep his eyes open; although very keen and often highly attentive, Marcus would suddenly walk off to explore a faculty building; Ben was also often very tired, but was the most focused, though his concentration could easily be disturbed by Jay, who would begin a conversation or find something of interest on his mobile phone.

Because of these challenges, it was necessary to occasionally break up the overt instruction with elements of brainstorming, or to find ways to present some of the teaching during the actual production process, while continually reinforcing the project’s end-goal and frequently summing up what had been accomplished and what was next to be done.

At the start of each day the team reviewed what had been achieved up to that point. We then set clear goals for the day to come. This type of steady, constant reinforcement provided the kind of guidance the participants needed to stay on track.

We always met at the Fusion building, for an expected and relaxed start to the day and Jim met us and briefed the boys on what to expect that day. This helped the boys as we have found in previous projects elsewhere, that not knowing what is happening next can prompt them to become unsettled and lose interest. That didn’t happen here (Preece, 2022 n.p.).

### *Modular Instruction*

Experiential learning involves the delicate interplay of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Designing learning experiences based on extrinsic motivation involves creating clear rewards and penalties related to learning requirements. On the other hand, designing learning experiences based on intrinsic motivation involves creating opportunities for participants to gain new forms of mastery which they will want to demonstrate (Deci 1971).

For this iteration of the DISC project the participants were not formally required to attend each day. The experience was something DCYJS and BU were offering to help fulfil certain aspects of their supervision period. Although participation was not mandatory, we were gratified that all three young men stayed the course, and for the presentation event came in their best clothes and were clearly pleased to see their work presented to BU staff and students on the big screen in the faculty theatre. The DCYJS staff were impressed by this positive outcome:

all boys attended every day, even despite some difficulties in their personal lives and influence of peers. They arrived tired on some days, but still turned up and made the effort. They have previously had poor school attendance, or for two, not been in any education, employment or training, so this was a significant, positive step. They all persevered with the project at each step (Preece 2022).

We found that negative behaviours were more likely to result when participants were not fully employed in ways they found stimulating. For example, during Day

One, which was primarily focused on devising the story (see Fig 1), the participants were initially quiet and not offering up ideas.

Participants are not merely controlled by the learning environment; they also help to constitute it (Bandura 1976). Therefore, participants must be properly supported and carefully guided through the learning process.

When designing the instructional components of this iteration, we drew on some of our past learnings (Gyori and Pope 2021). When designing the various iterations of DISC we have found that it is important to achieve the right balance between such structural interventions and the more free-form creative brain storming sessions. For instance, rather than always front-loading large amounts of overt instruction, we have found that basic content knowledge is often more easily and effectively absorbed when it is delivered just in time and on demand as education reform advocate James Gee advises (2003). This accomplishes two things. One: the overt instruction is parsed into smaller, more digestible packets, and two: it is shared when students are highly receptive, seeking the solution to a problem that are actively seeking to solve.

This modular approach meant we could pulse in with the right amount of instruction at the appropriate moment rather than front-loading a lot of lecture-like guidance that might have cause the participants to disengage. This helped the participants stay interested and active throughout the production process. It was also observed that:

lectures on photography and film were slightly longer than many usually sit for, but Saeed and Brad pitched it just right, and the boys sat well. Even when one appeared to lose focus, he didn't overtly show this, whereas in other settings, if he is not interested, he would walk out or tell the adult/s to f-off. That never happened during the project. The boys took on board what was said and were swiftly led into practical so they could apply what they had been taught and keep active (Preece, 2022 n.p.).

Following classroom-based instruction, we always moved directly to practical work. This allowed the participants to immediately apply concepts they had been introduced to moments earlier. As the learning process remained active, the participants remained engaged. According to the DCYJS: "The boys took turns equally and encouraged each other to try. When more familiar with what was needed for editing, they were more keen to take part." (Preece, 2022 n.p.).

#### *Behavior Modeling*

Participants are often most invested in the learning process when working alongside others, sharing insights and skills. This allows them to acquire knowledge and skills that can later be deployed without the support of others (Vygotsky 1986).

Each iteration of the DISC has had a strong social learning dimension, because each member of the participant group contributes to the digital narrative

being created, offering an opportunity for our teaching team to establish what Lave and Wenger call a "community of practice" (1991: 22). One aspect of our approach is to work alongside the participants every step of the way, which helped create a sense of common purpose.

We all ate together at the same table or nearby tables. The lecturers and student technicians joined lunch and chatted with them, which was a great and simple way to build a trusting relationship with the boys. It reinforced being part of a team throughout and always returned without needing to be chased (Preece, 2022 n.p.).

The learning community developed as the project progressed:

[there was] a strong sense of teamwork in the practical work, editing decisions and even sharing their ear pods or offering a chip at lunchtime... [Ben] was able to defer some of his leadership duties and would often say "we should ask the others" or "it's a team decision", which helped him to think of others and moderate his own behaviour...

... the boys attended every day. They were often tired, but still showed up. If running late, one would call the other and make sure they arrived, showing good teamwork and how they valued the project, relying on each other to each play their part. (Preece 2022 n.p.).

Another social dimension of the DISC is Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (1978: 86), noted also by Heron and Steckley (2018). According to this view, effective education experiences challenge learners to reach beyond their present abilities (Bandura, 1994). Basawapatna et al (2013: 12) have combined the concepts of flow (Csikszentmihályi 1990) and the zone of proximal development, coining the concept of "the zone of proximal flow". This occurs during a social learning process when a whole team of participants achieve a simultaneous state of heightened engagement.

Increasing engagement and satisfaction was observed as the participants learned from the project mentors and each other:

The boys all focused well and kept going until they got the task done. This part showed the best engagement and creative/listening skills. Given that they have experienced difficult and disrupted education, not having positive relationships with all their former educators, they adapted and showed respect to the lecturers and accepted challenge or being asked to repeat something. The beaming smile on their faces when they came out of the [sound] booth to sit with Jason, was genuine and showed they really had fun (Preece, 2022 n.p.).

#### *Role Reinforcement*

Encouraging the participants to choose what roles they would perform helped them feel more in charge of the learning process and thus more invested in its outcomes.

Jay, despite his sometimes-apatetic responses to prompts and questions when in the classroom briefing, he was keen to use the video camera, and during the shooting was visibly more involved and engrossed. He became the director of the project, a role he came to relish as he thought up ideas for framing shots and began making suggestions for dramatic blocking, helping the actors craft their performances.

Marcus wanted to be on-camera and was enthusiastic throughout, becoming the lead actor. He took ownership of this role by suggesting character motivations that informed specific scenes and experimenting with different performance styles, captured in the silent footage and still images featured in the final interactive narrative.

Ben was willing to be featured on camera but didn't want his face to be recognisable. We needed an antagonist to appear opposite Marcus so we asked Ben to suggest how this could be accomplished. After some careful consideration he said he would be willing to be filmed from behind and the camera could also show extreme close ups of his eyes, resulting in a menacing image that the team eventually picked as for the iconic title still for their completed project. By thinking through this challenge, Ben took on an additional role; and as the project continued to develop, he began to distinguish himself as its principal scriptwriter, coming up with many creative solutions for narrative dilemmas.

According to the DCYJS staff the participants found their production roles highly stimulating:

While filming, it was clear they had a positive attitude and status holding the kit or acting, and their identity was about this... It brought out their creativity and ability to achieve something. I could see them engaged in the task fully, particularly the practical side. They were mindful of other students/staff passing by to make sure they weren't in their way, showing respect for the public. Overall, they were able to adapt to the University environment and etiquette well, be successful as a team, and also got a lot out of it as individuals (Preece 2022 n.p.).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

This section reflects on our initial research questions, tying them to the five proposed pedagogic strategies and suggesting some areas for additional research. All of this is informed by our belief that the process of designing interactive stories is a great way to create opportunities for positive learning outcomes and interactions.

### 1. *How can we ensure that effective experiential learning occurs when participants are creating interactive stories?*

As in all our previous DISC iterations, participants in the summer of 2022 were empowered to experiment and innovate (de-risking autonomy). This meant our guidelines had to be clear and consistent, yet our approach had to be agile (flexible scaffolding). When interest waned in any aspect of the production process,

we deployed strategies to reinvigorate the participants and help keep them on track (modular instruction). The pre-production writing and preparation time offered was vital for the participants to come to terms with the concept of interactive stories, practicalities of production, and to develop their own story ideas. These sessions also provided ample opportunities for our learning facilitators to lead by example (behavior modeling). We also offered opportunities for the participants to shine as they took on various pivotal roles, capitalising on the power of intrinsic motivation to enhance engagement. Once the participants had selected their roles, we were able to guide them by asking key questions related to their chosen professional personae (role reinforcement).

### 2. *How do participants learn from each other and from mentors when creating interactive stories?*

The creation of a "community of practice" (Lave and Wenger 1991: 122) seems to us to be of central importance if a demanding project is to be completed on time and with a successful end-product. What was particularly encouraging to see was that young men who had been sanctioned for anti-social behaviour were finding pro-social ways to collaborate on a creative project. This required them to work cooperatively toward a common goal, to support each other and to value their own unique skill sets:

All the boys grew in confidence as they became more familiar with the task and spoke up with ideas or challenged others appropriately if they disagreed. They also started to share some humour with [the] adults but were never rude (Preece, 2022 n.p.).

### *A Note on Impact*

Creative writing educators undertaking participatory research of all kinds are naturally concerned that their work has an impact, in terms of an enjoyable process for the participants, and a product which is satisfying for both participants and researchers (who themselves are creative writers, filmmakers, sound engineers, and photographers in the DISC projects). Resourcing projects of this kind is almost always a first consideration, and impact is a key criterion for most funding bodies, so impact — however it is defined — has to be evidenced. These notes from Sarah Preece provide some indications:

Towards the end, Jay asked "do the Uni do scholarships?", showing he had that spark, and was inspired. (Preece 2022 n.p.).

[Marcus] spoke to one of the [BU] students about TEFL qualifications, as he is keen on this, so this was an opportunity to ask questions (Preece 2022 n.p.)

While certainly encouraging, we view this kind of feedback as an area for improvement. Follow-up is difficult, as the young men move on from DCYJS care and further contact is likely to be very limited. In future iterations we plan to speak to BU administrative staff and our project partners about tying our outcomes into, for example, widening participation goals.

An additional area where our insight into impact could

be more robust would be more effectively debriefing participants. We had Ben, Jay and Marcus fill out surveys before and after participating in the project, but their responses were rather cursory and vague, a more focused debriefing would have been a better way to capture detailed information about their first-hand experiences. That said, informal exchanges with the participants and their reaction to the finished project suggest they found the experience a highly positive form of learning:

[Jay] said at the end, that it was strange, but he is starting to get a few hours sleep at night now. He previously had a very erratic sleeping pattern and started the project with no sleep at night. We talked about how his brain has been so active and he said it has been a great opportunity, shook Jim's hand and asked about doing [a narrative] on his own soon. (Preece 2022 n.p.)

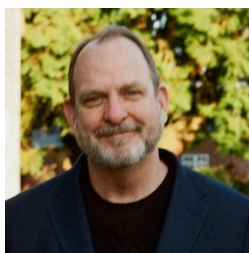
In terms of longer-term impact that the DISC might engender, longitudinal studies will be required; but in the short term, we consider such projects a constructive way of connecting a university to the local community. We also believe the proposed pedagogic strategies (*de-risking autonomy, flexible scaffolding, modular instruction, behavior modeling, and role reinforcement*) are highly effective tools that other educators working on collaborative learning projects will find useful. Finally, after designing multiple iterations of DISC, we are more convinced than ever that creating interactive stories is a fantastic way of helping previously disengaged learners change course and move onto more productive life-paths.

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**Dr Brad Gyori** is Principal Academic in Digital Storytelling at Bournemouth University, UK. An American writer, director and designer with a background in TV production, he is the programme leader for the MA in Creative Writing and Publishing. He also teaches journalism participants how to make interactive documentaries. Gyori has worked as a writer-producer for such networks as MTV, VH1, E!, FX and HBO. He was the head writer of the Emmy winning series *Talk Soup*. His theatrical works have been presented by Steppenwolf theatre, Phoenix Theatre and Bournemouth Emerging Arts Fringe. His short fiction has been published in *Mystery Tribune*, *No Parties Magazine*, *Café Irreal*, *The Ghost Story*, and the *Museum Journal*. He is co-director of the media arts conglomerate *Doppelgänger Productions*.



**Dr James Pope** is Principal Academic in English and Communication at Bournemouth University, UK. As well as several publications around his research into readers' reactions to digital fiction, James has also published six novels for children and teenagers. His interests are: how digital media are changing narrative forms, and reading and writing practices; the teaching of creative writing, particularly in digital media environments; and children's literature. He is the co-founder and, from 2010 to 2021, director of the annual international [New Media Writing Prize](#). He created [Genarrator](#), an online digital storytelling tool, currently hosting over 1200 interactive digital narratives. He co-edited *Texts of Discomfort*, a collection of essays on the practice of interactive digital storytelling (2021 Carnegie-Mellon Press).