WHITE WATER WRITERS-RESEARCH SNAPSHOT 7.11.17

DR YVONNE SKIPPER

SUMMARY

179 secondary school students were given questionnaires before and after the White Water Writers intervention.   Student questionnaires showed statistically significant gains in:

- Writing skill
- Team work
- Communication
- Pressure

- Novel writing
- Understanding personal skills
- Locus of control

Unsurprisingly, students did NOT believe that made improvements to their research skills. Somewhat surprisingly student evaluations of there own self esteem showed statistically insignificant gains. We would hope that this is related to the fact that they completed the second questionnaire before seeing the results of the work, but we are investigating further.

ABSTRACT

To examine the impact of White Water Writers, we used a questionnaire which explored participants' self-perceptions of skills, self-esteem, locus of control (feelings of whether they can control their lives), and feelings towards working and socialising with group members. This questionnaire was completed at the beginning of the week and repeated again at the end. The questionnaire at time two also included free response questions about their feelings about the intervention.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were N=179 young people from 14 secondary schools. Participants were aged 13 to 17 and 94 were male. The participants for White Water Writers camps are chosen by the schools. Discussions with teachers revealed that at times schools chose the highest performing, the lowest performing and children that it was felt lacked motivation.

DESIGN

The study used a repeated measures design. Participants completed questionnaires at Time 1, before the intervention and at Time 2, after the intervention. There was no control group due to the difficulty of matching participants completing the intervention with similar individuals who did not.

MATERIALS

Participants first completed a questionnaire examining their self-perceptions of their skills. This included writing: "How good are you at writing?" (with two other questions asking about typing and proofreading), working under pressure: "How good are you at working under pressure?" and "How good are you at working to deadlines?"; communication: "How good are you at telling people your ideas when writing?" (with a second question asking about verbal expression) and team work: "How good are you at giving feedback to others?" (other questions asked about delivering feedback to others and explicitly about team work). Other questions included perceptions of knowledge of writing a novel: "How good is your knowledge of how to write a novel?" and research skills "How good are you at researching?" and self-reflection "How good are you at knowing your own strengths?" with a separate question on weaknesses. Each of these questions was answered on a 6 point scale ranging from 'Very bad' to 'Very good'. This scale was developed for the current study.

Participants then answered eight questions regarding their self-esteem. These were taken from the Piers Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale, Second Edition (Piers-Harris 2, 2002) but shortened to only include items regarding academic self-concept. A sample item is "I am good in my schoolwork" and these questions were answered by writing 'yes' or 'no'.

The next section of the questionnaire examined locus of control. This was taken from The Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale (Nowicki & Strickland, 1971) shortened measure for children aged 6-12 was chosen. A sample item is "Do you feel that one of the best ways to handle most problems is just not to think about them?". Participants responded with by writing 'yes' or 'no'.

Finally, participants were asked how happy they would be to 'work with' and 'hang out with' the other participants in the project. This was answered on a five point scale from 'very unhappy' to 'very happy'.

These questions were repeated in the post test questionnaire. However, the post test questionnaire also included some free response questions to allow participants to write in their own words. The questions included here were: "What did you enjoy the most?" "What did you enjoy the least?" "Would you recommend the workshop to others?" "What skills do you think you improved the most during the workshop?"

WHITE WATER WRITERS PROCESS

White Water Writers takes participants through the process of writing a novel from conception to publication. The process is led by university students who have been trained to deliver the programme. They are supported by teachers who know the participants well. On Monday, the writers plan their novel. They are given a short brief which gives some information on the setting, characters and themes of the novel. This is not too directive, and instead acts as a prompt to help writers to formulate their ideas. Participants then spend a short time developing their own ideas for the novel before sharing them with the group. There is then a blue sky thinking session where participants discuss all their different ideas and bring them together to develop some general ideas for the story, as well as characters. At the end of this session, participants each take responsibility for a character. Participants then spend some time developing their character before sharing information about their character with the group. There is then a further planning session where the story is developed and each character's journey through the novel is developed. When this is complete, participants then plan the structure of the novel at a chapter level. This stage is complete at the end of Monday, meaning that by this stage participants have a clear idea about the structure of the novel and content of each chapter.

On Tuesday, participants begin to write the novel using specialised software which we have developed. They start by writing around ten bullet points for each chapter which describes in more detail, what will happen, for example, "Description of Ellie's room", "Ellie is bullied by Jack on the school bus". Once the bullets are complete, they are checked by each of the other authors whose characters appear in the chapter. This allows us to check for plot holes and inconsistencies in characters. Once this is done, participants begin 'fleshing out' the bullet points by writing around 100 words under each. Participants do not write the chapter they bulleted, but instead work on a chapter which someone else had planned. If participants are not sure what to write, they move on to another chapter. All writers move chapters regularly to promote team work and to ensure that the novel has a coherent 'voice.' This process continues until the end of Wednesday or Thursday lunchtime depending on the skill of the writers. The writers then have a full draft of their novel.

We then begin the proofreading stage. We print out copies of the novel and writers proofread chapters they have not bulleted or written. They make changes to spelling and grammar on these paper copies. When these are complete, they swap chapters and make the corrections on the computer. This is to ensure that two people agree the corrections. This process takes place until around Friday lunchtime. To complete the book, participants prepare a short biography which features in the novel. In addition the participants design the cover and produce a blurb. On Friday there is a countdown as they finish the final sections. Once the book is complete there is usually a small celebration in class. The book is then put up for sale on Amazon that weekend and a few weeks later participants are presented with professionally printed copies of their novel at a book signing event. Family and friends are invited to celebrate with them and often the local media also attend.

PROCEDURE

Schools were recruited to participate in the project, via letters to the headteacher. The schools then decided which students would participate in the project. Letters were sent to their parents explaining the aims of the project. This letter also contained information about the evaluation element of the project. It was made clear

to parents that they did not need to consent to the evaluation element in order for their children to participate in the project. This letter was 'opt in'. On the first day of the camp, children were also given information about the evaluation element and asked to give verbal consent to participate. Again, it was made clear that they could participate in White Water Writers regardless of whether they completed the questionnaire.

Participants then completed the questionnaire, working alone and asking questions if needed. Participants then completed the White Water Writers process. At the end of the week writers completed the post-test questionnaire. They were then debriefed and given the opportunity to ask questions.

RESULTS

To begin, data from the 'perceptions of skills' questions were combined to form four subscales. These were, writing, communicating, working to deadlines and giving and receiving feedback.

In addition, items from the self-esteem, locus of control and theory of intelligence subscale were combined, having reverse coded certain items. A paired samples t test was used to explore changes in each of these variables over time. Results suggested that changes were significant for all skills except for research and for locus of control and attitudes towards working with team members in the future. Differences were not significant in terms self-esteem, research skills and were marginal in terms of wanting to socialise with team members.

	Time 1		Time 2		T test
	M	SD	M	SD	
Writing skill	4.26	.96	4.85	.98	T(161)=-9.70, p<.001*
Team work	4.36	.77	4.77	.97	T(168)=-5.99, p<.001*
Communication	4.35	1.01	4.84	1.02	T(167)=-7.31, p<.001*
Pressure	3.98	1.08	4.53	1.11	T(166)=-6.65, p<.001*
Research	4.75	1.12	4.80	1.14	T(169)=-.55, p=.582*
Novel writing	3.70	1.22	4.87	1.11	T(173)=-11.73, p<.001*
Understanding personal skills	4.13	.99	4.66	.93	T(141)=-6.11, p<.001*
Self-esteem	1.21	.19	1.20	.20	T(171)=1.04, p=.30
Locus of control	1.59	.24	1.72	.23	T(170)=-7.20, p<.001*
Work with team mates	3.74	.94	4.00	1.06	T(127)=-2.81, p=.006*

Socialize with team mates	3.51	.95	3.67	1.14	T(127)=-1.69, p=0.052*

A light touch content analysis was conducted to explore how participants felt about the project in their own words.

95% of participants who answered the free response questions would recommend the project to others. When asked what they liked most about the project, the majority stated that they enjoyed writing and writing the story, for example "drafting was the most enjoyable", "I enjoyed the most when I was writing" and "typing the story". However, many participants also said that this was the thing they enjoyed least e.g. "the writing", "typing too much" and "typing hard".

Teamwork was also an element of the project that they both enjoyed and found challenging. For example they enjoyed "working with my friends" "working with people I never worked with before" and "working with, mostly, like-minded people towards a clear and visible goal." In contrast they did not enjoy "working with people who refused to put in their share of the work" "Arguing!" and "my plot idea being changed" and "the people in my group".

Participants generally enjoyed the planning stage "when we were planning the story," "coming up with ideas for the story" and "building my characters and putting other ideas out". Though again some participants did find this difficult "planning the cards" and "thinking about the ideas".

Proofreading was also an area which students generally disliked "I didn't enjoy the proof reading much because I just wanted to get on with it," "The changing of the grammar and punctuation". Although some students did enjoy proofreading e.g. "Correcting the paragraphs at the end".

The time pressure was seen as a positive by a small minority of students, e.g. they enjoyed "the pressure" and "the timer at the end". However, a number of students suggested that this was a negative experience for them e.g. "The stress: Oh God the Stress!" and "the stress and tension in the room when the timer was on, although it was quite funny at times".

It was interesting to note that many students did say that they felt positive about the finished product e.g. "knowing that you get a published novel at the end of it" "getting a copy of my book" and "the book being released". This external facing professional element was only ever mentioned as a positive. Additionally, students enjoyed expressing their creativity and no students mentioned this as a negative outcome "I liked flexing my creativity" and "Being creative in writing".

There was also a sizeable minority of students who enjoyed everything about the project and said there was nothing that they did not enjoy.

	Liked	Disliked
Typing/writing story	31.5%	16.5%
Teamwork	16.4%	12.1%
Planning story/characters	13.7%	7.8%
Finished product	8.8%	0%
Editing/proofreading	6.6%	25.7%

Everything or nothing	4.9%	19.4%
Creativity	4.0%	0%
Pressure	1.3%	6.3%

In terms of the skills which students said they developed the most, many students stated that they developed their typing skills the most e.g. "typing fast" as well as developing writing skills e.g. "writing, spelling and grammar". They also reported that they were better at working with others e.g. "Trying to work with other people in such an intense environment" "communication skills" "social skills" and "working in a team". Finally proofreading is something students improved a lot over the week "finding mistakes because I've been doing a lot of it" and "to always go over your work".

	Improved the most
Typing	33.6%
Writing	17.5%
Teamwork	19.3%
Editing/proofreading	13.0%

We also gave students the space to write any other comments. In this section it was interesting that many students thanked us for the experience. In addition, students used some very positive adjectives to describe the project, including superb, amazing, amazeballs, fantastic and "the best". Many also suggested that they hope that the workshop would continue for them and other students "Keep it up! People would definitely be interested in being involved" "Just that I hope the project continues" I think it was a great experience and I would love to do it again "thank you for making something I've always wanted to do and I really really enjoyed this workshop. And I will never say I can't again."