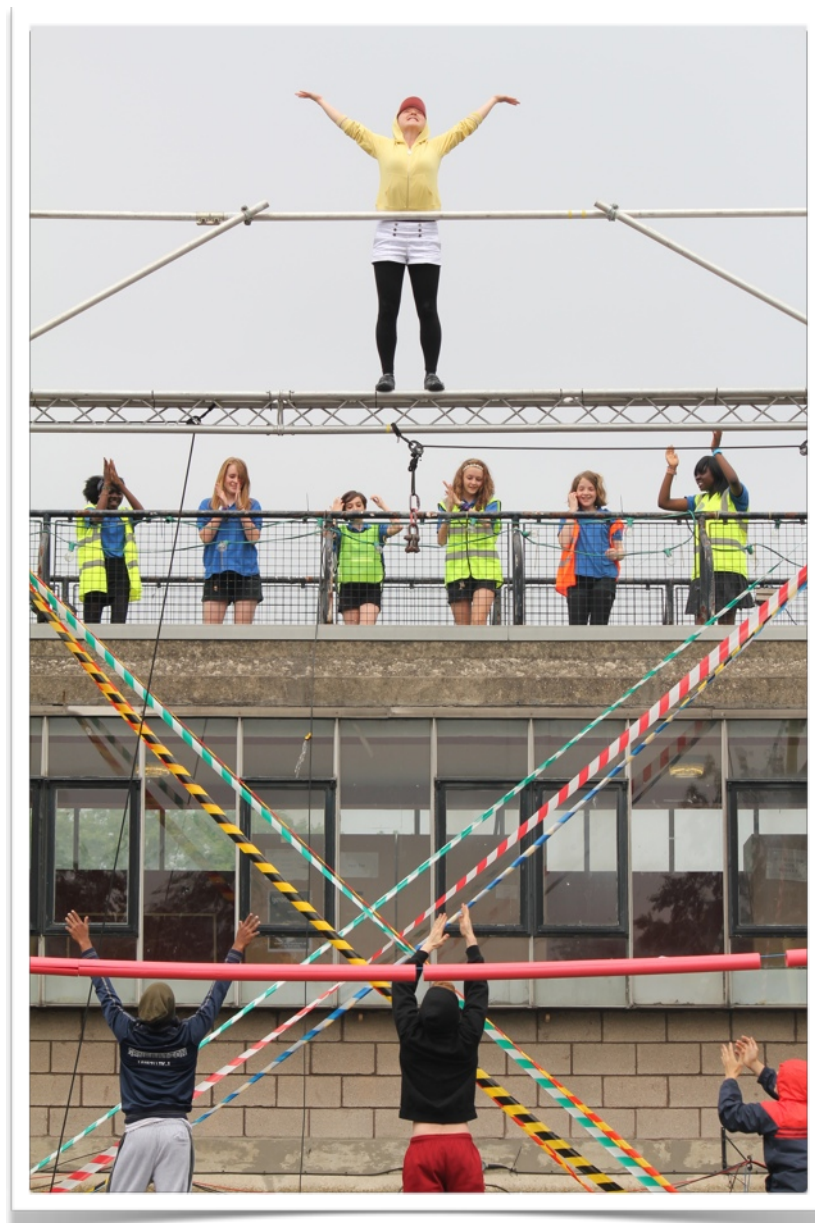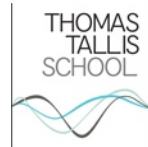# School of Creativity Report

July 2011

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Thomas Tallis School

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INTRODUCTION

Tallis tries to do things more creatively than other schools

Creativity is the way somebody thinks – the way they display their thoughts through technology, drama, maths – you can be creative in maths!

Three years ago Thomas Tallis School was designated as a national School of Creativity by the Government's flagship programme Creative Partnerships, in recognition of the longstanding commitment of the school to promote creative projects and learning. Whilst the Creative Partnerships programme will cease to exist in August 2011, it has been agreed that Thomas Tallis will continue to carry the School of Creativity designation; thus, it is important at this time to reflect briefly on the last three years – measuring against the original aims at the time of the designation – and more importantly to focus on how those aims, if they are still valid, can be built upon.

(Since the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education led to the setting up of Creative Partnerships in 1999, the merits or otherwise of 'Creative Learning' and 'Creativity' have been hotly debated, not least within Thomas Tallis itself; therefore this report assumes that both terms describe a practice that the school wishes to develop.)

This report draws on the author's observations – of meetings, staff conferences, creative projects and classroom activity; and meetings and interviews with staff - including the Head and members of the Senior Leadership Team - and students over the past three years.

(Quotes in italics are those given by students to the author; other quotes are staff contributions)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The designation of School of Creativity to Thomas Tallis was a recognition of the school's commitment to, and success in, developing creative activity and thinking; and the author believes that this commitment has, in most areas, continued – indeed, the school should be proud that many positive initiatives would have taken place whether Thomas Tallis was a School of Creativity or not. However, it is clear that some of the areas outlined in the Creative School Development Framework (CSDF) three years ago –

* How can we roll out good creative learning approaches across the whole staff team?

* All staff to be using, and sharing, information via blogs and the Tallis websites and ICT networks.
* To establish a whole school creative learning assessment framework.
* develop strategies for ensuring that students are able to define their preferred learning modes.
* devise better systems/processes for assessing and evaluating the impact of creativity across the curriculum on students' and staff learning.
* Promoting creativity across the curriculum and enhancing student voice.

which can be summarized as Promoting and Assessing Creativity; Enhancing Student Voice; Staff Development; Sharing Good Practice.

 – need the development of specific strategies to further develop them. To achieve this, Senior Leadership Team members need to take specific responsibilities for driving through change in those areas, as a matter of priority.

Creativity encourages you to think outside the box; It gives students freedom to understand what they're good at, and use their imaginations.

PROMOTING AND ASSESSING CREATIVITY

I mainly see Creativity as 'the Arts' – but it needs to go much further than that.

Ever since creative learning was developed as a distinct national strand of practice (around 2000), there has been concern that creativity, and its outcomes, would be difficult to assess. Only recently Anne Nolan has said that 'the Creative Curriculum will only be deemed a success if it can evidence that children's learning and their ability to learn has been enriched and that standards have risen' (The Creative Curriculum, 2010).

The nature of how such evidence can be gathered has been much discussed at Thomas Tallis over the last three years, and some of that thinking led to the development of a Creative School Assessment Framework in early 2010. However, the Framework was never adopted – it was a reasonably complex document that appeared to 'measure' creativity in a very uncreative way, resulting in a summative number rather than a formative understanding of what was happening - and it is clear that a new approach is needed; one that includes the learner as an equal partner, and where the student knows what they need to do to be better at something, indeed where the process of assessment itself inspires their learning. The Tallis Lab initiative has begun to address this need, and offers the best immediate opportunity for the assessment of creative learning.

We are tired of 30s-style textbook learning where there's no real engagement and passion...with Lab, there is more substance, and we can help ourselves as well as the teachers helping us.

Despite this student's enthusiasm, others – acutely aware that the rest of their schooling and further education is conditional upon their achievement being reflected in 'marks' - have expressed the need for clearer assessment procedures in Tallis Lab – 'Why are we doing this?

What marks do I get?'. However, the current timetabling of Tallis Lab - one hour a week - makes deep assessment all but impossible, with no time to track skills development, and for proper student-led reflection and evaluation.

I like having all day – when I have an idea I like to work on it, and when you have to keep going and changing to different places, it's really hard; to spend six or seven hours a day on one thing, even if you're doing different things within it, is how it's going to be when you grow up and go to work.
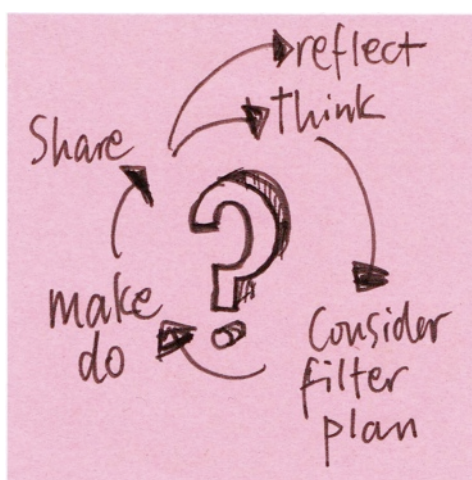
This plea by a student is reflected in some staff thinking, with one suggestion being to explore the notion that one hour a week could be changed to one day a month – 'if you start with Year 7, you can build on the freedom of thought that they've developed in primary school; older students aren't used to being presented with difficult ideas, are more reliant on adults – secondary schools seem to knock creativity out of them'.

Tallis Lab is a reflecting lesson: you have to think of ideas and you are not told exactly what you should be doing. You are given an idea and then you have to expand it by yourself which I think is good because you get more independence; this gives us more help when we're older, when we're doing our jobs we're not going to be reading a manual saying what to do, we're going to be thinking it up ourselves.

Such proposals will receive resistance - 'Say to a teacher 'you need to get those 3 kids A to C, but we're also going to explore an approach that might be messy' – that's a challenge'. However, by carefully beginning the process in 2012, supported by the SLT and clearly explained to all stakeholders – with teachers offered structured support for change within a 'no-blame' culture – an open and enriching assessment process should be possible, one where 'hopefully by Year 10 we don't have students lacking the skills that they seem to be

lacking at the moment'. With a whole-school programme, it should be possible to avoid the flaws addressed by these two students:

We need more Creative Learning, definitely; but some of us always opt to do things, and there should be more encouragement for other students.

There has to be an aspect of curriculum learning in order to progress – it won't work if every lesson is creative, creativity is better if you get glimpses of it...if everything is creative, then is anything creative?

There is a slight misunderstanding here between creative learning and creative projects that take place in the school, but it does highlight a worry amongst some students and staff that certain students will be left behind if all of the focus is on creative learning – if we accept that all students are different, then some students will want to learn 'uncreatively'. However, it should be fairly straightforward to emphasize that creative teaching is about taking account of different modes of learning, and that 'harder-to-reach' students are often the most responsive to creative engagement - 'I recently gave students iPod touches to make films, and it had a major impact on some students who are often disaffected; they went off for an hour, completed a film, and were pleased with their learning, and able to be trusted'.

(In Tallis Lab) we get to use technology every lesson, which is a good way of expanding our ideas because using pen and paper is quite limited. You can do research and make presentations easily.

I work better in lessons that are fun, and different, and Tallis LAB is fun and different.

(In the original Creative School Development Framework, there was an emphasis placed on students being able to define their preferred learning modes. However, it is apparent that this approach may already be outdated; in sessions such as Tallis Lab it is clear that students' learning is multi-modal; it may, within one lesson, involve discussion, writing, blogging, filming, drawing, etc. It may therefore be more relevant to talk of 'personalised learning', with staff creating structures whereby they can identify what individual students are interested in learning, and factor that knowledge into Schemes of Work.)

So, it can be difficult to assess creative learning, and it requires a degree of courage on the part of a school and its staff to attempt to do so, particularly when the 'standards agenda' is so prevalent – but league tables are a reality, and if a school wants to shape its own future, it has to get the results. Pleasingly, recent improvements in results in the core subjects have 'bought an opportunity' to implement creative learning and assessment approaches, and to look longer term, where creativity – e.g. the opportunity to engage in projects with creative outcomes rather than one-off lessons – flourishes. This opportunity sits alongside a belief among some staff that many of the earlier struggles to prioritise creativity have been overcome - 'there is more of an acceptance that in order to sustain high attainment and really good learning – to get students engaged and really excited about learning – is beginning to seep into the school culture'.

Key to the approval of any substantial change to the the curriculum will be parental engagement, particularly those who are parents to students entering Year 7 in 2012. Clear and strong leadership will be required in order to detail the creative approach that Thomas Tallis practises – highlighting, for example, the Creative Manifesto – and what will be expected of students and their parents. In order for parents to be properly supportive of their students, they will themselves need to be offered support, and possibly training, in ICT; indeed, one parent has already pointed out 'we can't help them if we don't understand what they're doing – can we not have a training session in school?'
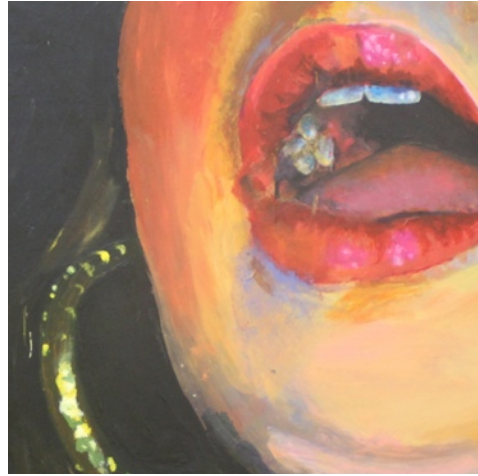
ENHANCING STUDENT VOICE

Having us observing in a classroom is a really good idea, but the teacher and the pupil observing need to be on the same level.

An aim identified alongside the original SoC designation was the 'Development of ideas and practical outcomes for student-led learning'. In discussion, this was expanded to include student voice in all aspects of the school life, from curriculum development to catering, from school uniform design to a manifesto for creative activity.

In some of these aspects - and here, Thomas Tallis were building on innovative practice originally developed by the Sorrell Foundation in its Joinedupdesignforschools initiative - groups of students learnt how to commission artists, and develop creative briefs whilst acting as clients; as a result, there was deep creative engagement with artists such as Gilles & Cecilie

Studio who were commissioned to work alongside students on graphic wall display designs for the new school; Alina Breuil Moat, a recent graduate of the London College of Fashion's sustainable fashion MA course, who was commissioned by a group of students to develop the new school uniform; Eelyn Lee, a film maker, who worked on a series of briefs, including the creation of a film written, designed and performed by the Tallis Creators team; and Tangled Feet Theatre Company, who over the three years developed sustained creative relationships with many students through a series of artist commissions. It is essential that the school continues this practice, enhancing as it does student voice and responsibilities, engagement, and creative learning (as a substantial side effect - all of the above practitioners have placed great emphasis on how such student-led creative collaborations have enhanced their own practice, and have featured the outcomes on their websites - it also promotes Thomas Tallis School throughout the creative community, which will encourage other practitioners to collaborate with the school in the future)

Students are also formally involved in the School Council, and in a number of Action Research Groups looking at specific areas; others are engaged in informal consultation and posting on websites, and a recent initiative has seen students – with support from parents – begin to use iPods to reflect on lessons, and their own learning progression.

However,

the system of School Council needs rethinking; being part of it has made me understand that we don't have enough say in the lessons, and how they are taught – it's just the teacher teaching how they've been told, by the higher-up people, or the Government. There isn't a way that we can feed back our opinions – the material we need to change the school needs to be coming from the pupils - rather than (discussion about) the price of paninis.

It is accepted that the staff needs to be engaged alongside students in developing a more effective student advocacy group - 'students are the biggest, and most creative resource that the school has; there are lots of opportunities for students to engage, not as many to lead' – and this will need to be properly focused on curriculum delivery and assessment. It will need to understand that there might be resistance and/or misunderstanding from staff – some may

see student observation as threatening and undermining – as well as students and parents as to the nature and purpose of such engagement.

It will be crucial that any fears are allayed by both the nature of the consultation, and the way in which student voice is acted upon. In discussion, there is agreement from both students and staff that the issue needs to be handled sensitively – that students would need to apply to be part of such a group, for example, and that areas of observation would be defined with the aim of positive support, and not merely as a form of criticism – but that the benefits could be widespread and long-lasting – 'a group of trained student curriculum advisers would be fantastic'.

The genuine worries that some staff may hold should not be a reason for inaction on promoting student voice; staff should be subject to consultation, but not veto - a School of Creativity has, by its very nature, to challenge and when appropriate overturn conventional notions of teaching practice.

We need to make the relationship between the teacher and the pupil stronger.

The initiative with iPods mentioned above also needs to be developed and it is hoped that effective wireless internet access in the new school will facilitate this. Each department should, as a result of structured and constructive input from students, receive honest feedback on the quality of learning, student support and progress, and the nature of the curriculum; it should then reflect on the feedback in faculty meetings and in turn feed back to students and parents. Once again, it is important that this initiative is not seen as threatening to teachers – e.g. ensuring that all student feedback is de-personalised - but promoted as one that is enlightening for staff, students and parents.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT

'Creativity is associated with resilience, rigour, initiative, persistence and independence, and teachers who develop those skills amongst their learners are the teachers who get the best results'.

Central to the development of creative approaches to learning is the adoption of Information and Communications Technology, as such technology enables multi-modal methods of learning and dissemination; such centrality surfaced repeatedly in discussions with the school's Headteacher at the outset of SoC status, and indeed it was said that 'over the next three years, those staff that aren't on board with the creative agenda will increasingly find that they're not welcome; they've either got to get on board, or it will be made apparent that they're best off somewhere else'.

There are loads of lessons where we try different, fun ways to learn...today in Maths was very creative, using games to get answers.
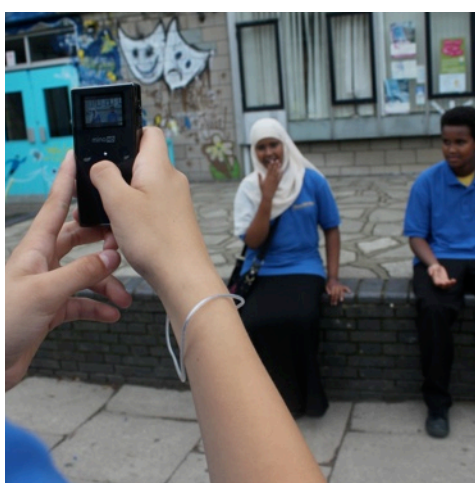
In English, role play is very exciting; I like projects that run over more than one lesson. It made me look forward to it, and made us try harder – to get to the end of the project, we had to write lots...

There has undoubtedly been huge progress in staff uptake in, and use of, ICT and creative learning techniques in the classroom – subjects such as History, English and Maths have been mentioned; recent staff training commits every subject area to a creative use of new technologies, and to present proposals for implementation to an Assistant Headteacher.

With the move into the new school, and with ICT forming a central core of the infrastructure of the building and facilities, as well as dedicated technical support available to all subject areas, all staff will have the opportunity to engage in the use of a range of agile and flexible ICT solutions with which to promote creative outcomes (e.g. blogs, podcasts, films) - 'we have the opportunity, with broadcast and studio equipment, and all of the new technology, to standardise new learning approaches across the staff team'.

There are concerns amongst some staff as to the time that they have to spend in learning how to use devices, and then the time consumed in posting material online, but in general there are high expectations as to the potential benefits of ICT use.

When the SoC designation was first awarded to Thomas Tallis, there were 19 other schools similarly designated across the country; the following year another 40 were designated. It was expected that Creative Partnerships would use the schools in order to develop a network of good creative practice, with which other less creative schools could engage and learn from. This network was never established – the experience of Thomas Tallis is that rather than positive networking, the process has been one of overweening bureaucracy - and contact between individual schools has been piecemeal, driven by individual teachers. Thus, there is still a need for the development of a forum for the sharing of good practice, but it may operate on a more informal basis using social networks – e.g. Thomas Tallis has many hundreds of followers on Twitter from across the education spectrum.

This last example demonstrates how Thomas Tallis has been proactive in disseminating the school's good practice; 'The learning approaches that we've developed are 'out there', online - the story that we have told about what's happening here has reached a big audience, and Tallis is seen as an innovator; recently, I led a Skype CPD session with a group of art teachers in Sunderland...we're fully engaged in the national debate on creativity?'''

As a result of the school's profile, the author has met many teachers, education professionals, and practitioners around the country, who know of Thomas Tallis School; thus, the pressure on sustaining momentum is going to be from 'outside', as well as the students who have experienced how the school works, and want more -

We need more Creative Learning, definitely.