

Pot Doodle Presentation

Contemporative, Tate Britain, April 2004

This presentation was delivered as a conversation between Ben Warrender - an art teacher from Hengrove Community Arts College and me.

Fran: Our presentation is the result of our recent discussions and reflections about Pot Doodle one year on..... This four week project took place in June 2003. It was based around drawing and lead towards an exhibition in the school's new art gallery, the production of a film and a peer led workshop delivered at a feeder junior school. Twenty Year 10 students worked with six artists over a total of eight days.

This morning we will explore 3 key issues

- independent learning
- collaboration
- measuring success

Ben: We conclude by exploring Pot Doodle's legacy. There are many issues we do not have time to address in detail. For example it is interesting that experimental drawing was chosen as a focus for the project as there is much debate inside and outside of formal education about the subject.

Fran: At this point it would be useful to contextualise Hengrove. The school is in challenging circumstances, serving one of Bristol's most deprived housing estates. At the beginning of 2002 the school was awarded arts college status. The art department regularly hits 80 – 90% A – C grades. However the average for A-C's across the other departments is 12%. The school is now in special measures and as a result is changing and looking for ways to generate independent learning. How can you teach critical skills and independent learning?

Ben: Pot Doodle enabled teachers, gallery staff and artists to work with students who tended to have low self esteem, limited literacy and oral skills and valued end products as opposed to process.

These students explored new ways of working in a safe environment where they

- participated in small groups
- were allowed to experiment, take risks and make mistakes
- and encouraged to ask questions

Why should schools, galleries and artists collaborate?

Fran: Firstly the collaboration enabled new and unexpected learning situations outside of the art gallery's usual education space and the school's normal routine and timetable. The project leaked out of the classroom and activities took place at different locations around the school campus, in Arnolfini's gallery spaces and across the city.

Within these new situations students were

- 'walking tall'
- willing to experiment and take risks
- and began forming more mature relationships amongst their peers, with artists, gallery staff and teachers

In the evaluation students were asked if they felt more confident as a result of taking part in the project. They spoke about feeling better about

'working in groups and speaking more to others'

When students were asked about they had learnt about drawing during the project they talked about how

'there are different ways of drawing other than with pencil and paper'

and that

'drawing does not have to copy what you see'

One student spoke about how

'you need to think about what you want others to get out of viewing your work'

During the exhibition students expressed pride in the project (even dragging teachers and the school policeman into gallery to see show and balance oranges on their heads). How can schools, galleries and artists improve how they work together?

Ben: This project was not a bed of roses. At points it was a logistical nightmare.

When proposing projects outside agencies need to give consideration to the realities of working within a busy school environment, in particular pressures on space, organising parental consent forms and the effect of taking students out of lessons and the impact this has on their other subjects. This impact is heightened particularly with Year 9's before their SAT's and all GCSE groups. During Pot Doodle, although the school allowed the Yr 10 students 8 days in 1 month out of their normal timetable, some students became a little anxious about falling behind with course work. Projects also need to be timed appropriately to avoid pressure points in the school year such as building work and exam time.

Artists who worked successfully with students were good communicators and broke processes down into easily accessible stages. It's all very well inviting the most outstanding artists with the most exciting practice in the world. However if they have never worked with teenagers before or have no interest in the school context they will have a nightmare. The processes which worked well were flexible and did not rely on perfect, dream facilities.

It would be great to have a funding structure and application process that was flexible enough to allow schools, galleries and artists to plan projects together before the main bid is submitted.

It could be that many problems could be tackled at an early stage and new possibilities identified which meet each parties needs.

Fran: How can you measure the success of a project based around contemporary art practise?

Ben: On reflection, our criteria for success was not simply nicely finished, mounted coursework.

- the outcomes won't be used in GCSE folders
- work produced contradicts Hengrove's 'realist' 'house style'

Fran: But instead we saw:

- positive relationships and a mutual trust develop between students, peers, teachers, artists and gallery staff
- students were willing to participate in open-ended processes
- student's self esteem developed over the duration of the project
- the project produced a professional film and a challenging exhibition open to the school and the community
- students also articulated their learning during their peer led workshops with a local junior school

So - who learnt the most - students, artists, gallery staff or teachers?

Ben: No one group learnt most, it was a steep, mutually beneficial learning curve for everyone. In the short term self esteem was boosted - however in the long term we are only really identifying and articulating the potential 1 year on.

Fran: I would say Ben and I have developed a very real shared understanding of the value of working with contemporary art within a difficult school - beyond fulfilling the demands of the national curriculum. To conclude - what is Pot Doodle's legacy? In order to answer this question fully we need to respond from our different perspectives as a teacher and artist.

Speaking as an artist Pot Doodle has enabled me to rethink how I would like to operate in educational contexts.

Wonderful, wonderful things came out of this project. But I question how much of it involved artists being brought in to act as mediators, interpreters or educators as opposed to the project structure emerging out of or being led by artists' practice and processes.

Personally I want to move away from mediating and interpreting contemporary art practice to operating as an artist within the very structures and systems of education itself. I want to develop a deeper engagement with a place and it's community. I would like time to embed myself within the fabric of a school for a while to observe the institutions systems and how people behave within them. Only after this period of research and reflection would a project proposal emerge in response my observations.

As an artist I want to ask questions that interrogate situations or contexts and explore ideas that challenge the way we perceive the world. Pot Doodle began to do this but there is still so much more potential.

Ben: I manufacture exam students! The students produce highly finished work for their G.C.S.E folders. As an Art Department, we impose techniques on students, which guarantee success. For example, you need to be an outstanding draughtsman to produce a good lino print or a clay pot.

However, I would like to place a greater emphasis on experimentation, to try to develop the people themselves. People who have a desire to learn, to explore and to question rather than simply mass produce end products. I would like to breed in our pupils a "natural curiosity".

In order to do this it is necessary for pupils to embrace failure as part of the creative process. For example, the artwork may not look particularly attractive at first, it could be very different or it could be abstract.

This would also involve reconsidering approaches to teaching. I would like to see learning where the pupils are actively learning for themselves and not completely dependent on their teachers.