
A Week Sketching Fruit: Year 8 students at work with a visual artist

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ABSTRACT The content of many school lessons is increasingly determined by the requirement to 'cover' what is laid down in England's National Curriculum. In this situation transmission or 'delivery' models of teaching all too often become the norm. This article records aspects of a very different kind of teaching and learning, and presents some responses to it from both students and teachers.

'Follow the signs', they tell me at the entrance. To reach the Royal Norfolk Regimental Museum, part of Norwich Castle's museum-complex, follow the signs past a stuffed tiger stalking stuffed gazelles, past the skull of a mammoth unearthed in West Runton, past flint axe-heads and ammonites and on down a spiral staircase within a stone shaft to a tunnel deep underground. The Castle was also a prison, and so I walk the tunnel in the footsteps of prisoners until I emerge on the front line, amid the crack of shell-bursts and the stuttering rifles. An officer in a dug-out holds a black telephone. He wears a Kitchener moustache. Hunching my shoulders, I zigzag the length of the trench and escape at last into the rooms housing the Royal Norfolk Regiment's memorabilia. I have never been here before. The high wall above me is taken up with silent film: projected black-and-white images of members of the regiment marching or at ease. Around me are big sturdy drums and wall-posters detailing the regiment's history. I see uniforms from different eras standing at attention without heads or legs. I see standards, battle-honours, a parade of cap-badges. I don't see another person, or the work I have come to view.

That work has been made by Year 8 students from a Norwich community comprehensive school as part of a National Lottery-funded project entitled 'You Must Remember This'. The project enabled a visual artist to work for ten days with two separate classes of Year 8 students around the theme of remembrance. It was an opportunity to bolster self-motivation and independent learning, and to dedicate a lengthy amount of time to making art. Each class would have the chance to hear from veterans of World War Two and to participate in a varied series of activities designed by Karl Foster, a Norwich-based artist. These

activities would expand the students' understanding of what art might be and how they could make it. I was present for the second week to see what was happening, gather feedback and compile a report.

A Kangaroo and a Cello-case

The students were taken off-timetable for the week of the programme and based out of school in a local church-hall. As well as organising the visits by veterans and enabling discussion of their wartime memories, Karl ensured students were introduced to the work of a number of contemporary visual artists. These included Cornelia Parker (who persuaded the army to blow up a shed she had built then collected the fragments and re-arranged them as an installation called 'Frozen Explosion', recently seen in Norwich), Susan Hiller (whose work is often presented in boxes, as the students' work would be), David Shrigley (whose humour provoked both enjoyment and resistance) and Josef Beuys, shot down in flames in World War 2 and kept alive thanks to the properties of certain materials which would figure again and again in his work after the war. Karl and his partner Kimberley had fashioned attaché-case-sized metal boxes, one for each student, which would contain the work produced across the week.

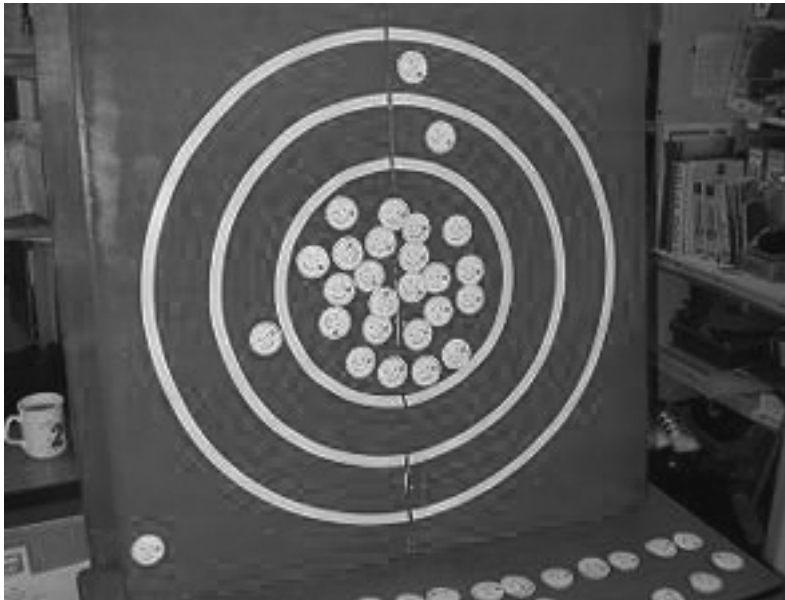


They had also put together a variety of unexpected, even surreal, objects which from time to time they produced from a strange container, the Object Dialogue Box. Wooden, and secured with metal clasps, the Box appeared to me like a cross between a kangaroo and a cello-case. The objects which emerged from its various compartments included a pedal-bin topped with an officer's cap, a chunky stone sporting a bike-brake's cable and lever, and two yachts becalmed

in perspex boxes, one with a sail of lead. Such hybrid objects generated much talk and interest among the students. They said working with the Box was *intense* and *exciting*, in part because all its secrets were not revealed at once. What might come out of it this time? Whatever did sparked imagination and widened the horizon of the possible, so that students began to produce unexpected objects of their own.

Target-Board

Karl's programme engaged the students daily in a range of practical art-making activities. From the outset students were encouraged to free their perceptions of what might count as art. Using their unaccustomed hand they drew portraits of classmates. They sanded away the heads or bodies from figures in Edwardian photographs, then spoke about what it was like to inflict this damage. They created unlikely footsoldiers for an 'Army of Misfits', on whose flags and standards they inscribed the earliest memories of their relatives and friends. They drew the story of the yachts in charcoal on a paper sea. They made small objects to place in their cases, decorated the cases themselves (sometimes with their own fingerprints) and wrote about aspects of their family's recollections for the museum-display.



Across the week the whole group regularly discussed ideas and possibilities, considered the art-works and objects from the Box and weighed up reactions to their work and the best ways for it to be displayed. Each practical activity was assessed by the students using what Karl called his 'Target-Board', a metal

square showing a series of roundels. Each student placed on the Target-Board a magnetic 'face' whose look-smiling perhaps, or frowning, or nonplussed-corresponded to how they had felt while doing the activity. The closer to the centre of the Board they placed their 'face', the more the activity had engaged them. Here was a way to give significance to student-experience in process. The students were also encouraged to talk about the way activities had gone. Any criticisms were taken seriously. Several students told me how important it was for them to know their reactions to the different activities were being given weight. Karl accepted whatever came back from students so long as it was reasoned. To those less keen on reflecting: 'We can't just make and not think' was what he said. Across the week the quality of the students' responses to objects from the Box and to the new and often conceptual artworks deepened. Students became more ready to explore. 'People are more interested in things you can ask questions about', one student told me.

Proper Lessons

Each day teachers who might normally be with the class came to help out. Some saw new sides to their students. One teacher noted that students quiet in school were asking questions out of it. Another wrote on the project's Evaluation Form that:

The things that stick in my memory are...seeing some of the more naughty children really interested and getting involved.

Another wrote:

I was amazed to see kids working so well as independent learners...However to a 'traditional' teacher this all might be viewed as chaos. No lesson objectives or clear outcomes!

Yet another was prepared to state:

I didn't realise that students have the ability to think so quickly and creatively.[W]hen faced with stimulus objects they can respond (some of them) with imagination and some real insights.

For some teachers, an existing commitment to creativity was further endorsed by what they saw during the project. One wrote:

I want to hear more about creative teaching and 'thinking outside the box'...Sometimes you feel as a teacher, that other teachers will look down on you because you spend so much time on creative activities. They don't always see them as 'proper' lessons.

Working in these ways placed a great deal of responsibility on students. The ability of individuals to take control of their own display-work certainly varied across the week and across the group I observed. Not all students managed to stay focused and to contribute positively all the time, and for some of the

visiting teachers this was a drawback: 'Would this work on a day-by-day basis in school?' one asked. Another suggested:

The weakness of the project is the complexity of finding a balance between allowing the children to be creative and 'free' but also in balancing this with high expectations for behaviour and participation... a small minority of students display challenging behaviour and general apathy towards the processes.

Nonetheless, this teacher also noted that the students

have become more confident in themselves and in their capacity to approach issues and tasks with creativity.

Free Your Mind

For many of the students an opportunity to work in ways they themselves largely determined was something they thrived on. 'By the end it was great because we were given more freedom', one commented. Another said:

At the beginning it was a bit boring because we had to do what he told us. Halfway through it was better as we started to have our own ideas about things.

For several students it came as a surprise that they were given choices about what to do or to make. Even the least-engaged student was prepared to find something positive to write on the Evaluation Form, and had been impressed with at least one object from the Box: 'I was amazed to see the rock with da brake thing in it.'

From the interviews I conducted with students it seemed clear that they had benefited from the variety of activities and encounters organised for them across the week. They had been enabled to think in sustained and concentrated ways about matters of war, memory and forgetting, and by working as artists each student had been able to transmute the lived experience of the week into something solid for others to encounter. 'I didn't realise that boring objects can be turned into amazing things', one student told me. Another said:

I thought it was going to be sketching fruit through the week. But we got to sand pictures, stick stuff, draw anything you like, and decorate your case and take pictures.

For a third student

when it was halfway through the week it was a great project. I knew things that I never had known before!

A fourth found that the objects from the Box

just like free your mind...at school it's not good to express yourself
all the time cos here you can really let your mind go wild and stuff
but there you've got to pin it on certain things.

A fifth student believed that discussion across the week had become more engaged and committed:

I've learned a bit more about how to be creative cos like as the
week's gone on he'd ask us what we think of these pictures and at
the start we'd just say 'interesting'...'weird'...but now we like make
stories about 'em and say like lines in a story what they could be so I
think everyone's got a bit more creative from this work.

Several students told me that the project had added to what they knew of World War Two. At least one student was prompted to talk about the War with people at home, and so discover aspects of her family history which she had never known. Across the week students brought in objects from home to do with warfare or life in wartime, such as photos, a medal from the Napoleonic campaigns or an inscribed school-book from the 1930s. The overlooked or unconsidered was being seen afresh. Some students, inspired, worked on their exhibits in the evening.

Anyone's Gaze

Is such a week replicable in school, amid timetable-constraints and budget-shortfalls, straitjacketed lesson-planning and all that works against collective creativity? I think interested teachers would find many activities created for this project adaptable to classroom-conditions. Visitors can be welcomed, materials collected over time, artwork encountered via the internet. The stimulus afforded by objects from the Box is undeniable, and the Box itself can be made available for teachers to use. But the materials and activities draw their true educative power from the values expressed in the project. 'You Must Remember This' offered students time, space, materials, experiences and possibilities to make use of in ways they could decide almost entirely for themselves. It did not differentiate or seek to deliver or to test. Rather, it tried to help students make the most of what was on offer in ways that were meaningful for the students, and to help them solve the difficulties inevitably encountered. The project trusted students. It made their views and opinions visible and weighty as part of the working-process. It helped them meet contemporary art, believing such art was meant for them as much as for anyone. It had faith in their ability to make art, and demonstrated this faith by presenting their art to anyone's gaze in one of Norwich's prestigious spaces.

So, wandering in the Regimental Museum like anyone, I come upon two Armies of Misfits confronting each other. I see in the ranks the strange headless or bodiless figures from the sanded photos and find the rows of students' cases, their clean metal skins silver as fish. I think of the cases carried by evacuee-

children crowding platforms in wartime newsreels or clutched by refugees fleeing the firestormed cities. Inside each I see the final arrangement of objects, tiny labels, fingerprints, snapshots, fabric-scrap, the miniature rubble representing a blitzed street, the balls of tape yellow as fat in a work by Beuys. I put faces to some of the names and recall those who liked their artwork and those who were disappointed with it. I remember how one student summed up the week:

At the beginning I felt challenged by the work set. Halfway through I began to feel more confident with my work. I enjoyed using my imagination. By the end I was tired and satisfied with the work. I was surprised that I can draw stuff, and at my confidence. I was disappointed by nothing.

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