DOMINIC WILCOX IN CONVERSATION
Dogs, textiles and the art of undoing
Drawing with visually impaired students
The power of art to improve children’s mental health

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If you have a child repeatedly coming uninvited into your classroom or art room, Graham Hooper’s article ‘You’re a lifesaver’ (page 10) may resonate. Art and design spaces frequently become unique environments for troubled pupils, a special and safe place where ideas can be tried out or issues worked through. This AD considers how our subject can, for some young people, change the course of their learning and lives.

Lisa Harker, chief executive of The Art Room, a charity aimed at 5–16 year olds experiencing emotional and behavioural difficulties, reports an escalation in many critical mental health problems amongst their referrals. This includes self-harm, eating disorders, anxiety and depression. On page 6, she shares how The Art Room’s nine ‘studios’, their methodology, and its connections between art and therapy in mainstream settings, has helped stop such problems from escalating.

In Sarah Meader’s ‘Lessons in mindfulness’ (page 16), the art teacher describes her response to a burgeoning pile of assessments. Ripping up the rulebook, she instead instilled an atmosphere of wellbeing through ‘mindless doodling’, which was then incorporated into her curriculum. Dr Claire Penketh (page 12) also asks of aspects of curriculum and assessment act as institutional barriers to participation. She argues that there can be significant ‘gains’ for the subject ‘where the experiences and contributions of disabled people are more fully recognised’.

Finally, a big thank you to Dominic Wilcox, artist, designer and inventor, and to Dr Rachel Payne who, in conversation on page 2, examine Dominic’s own learning journey. He explains what inspired him to create Little Inventors, an innovative initiative which aims to help children better understand and what design is and its positive impact on our lives.

Sophie Leach, Editor, AD Twitter: @nsead_sophie

Please send article proposals and submissions to sophieleach@nsead.org

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In his own words designer and inventor Dominic Wilcox works ‘between the worlds of art, design, craft and technology’ to create innovative and thought-provoking objects. Here in conversation with Dr Rachel Payne, senior lecturer in visual culture and arts-based pedagogy at Oxford Brookes University, he explains his motivations, inspirations and influences.

Rachel Payne: I’ve been looking through your website and I’m struck by how exciting and unconstrained your work is; it has a subversive and rebellious nature which is so refreshing. Have you been inventing since you were a child?

Dominic Wilcox: I don’t think I was outwardly any more creative than the typical child. I made model airplanes and hung them from my bedroom ceiling, and I painted fantasy lead figures, but nothing particularly inventive. I don’t think you would have thought I would definitely become a person working in creativity as an adult.

It wasn’t until I left school and started an art and design foundation course at Sunderland University that I discovered I had an ability to come up with inventive ideas. A teacher called Charlie Holmes was an artist and a tutor on the course. He showed us a book of unusual inventions, and everyday objects with a twist. He then challenged us to come up with our own ideas and I found I could do it and enjoyed doing it. I’ve been doing it ever since. So it really is an example of how some people can have untapped potential, lying dormant, until someone shows what is possible, and then challenges that person to try it.

You have an undergraduate degree from Edinburgh College of Art and a masters from the Royal College of Art. How did your higher education after your foundation course impact on your career? What aspects of university life did you particularly enjoy?

I did a visual communication degree at Edinburgh College of Art that was very much idea-based rather than skill-focused. At that point I was just going in the general direction of being creative, without a plan for where I would end up. During the course I could see a pattern in my work, in that I communicated my ideas through conceptually twisting normal, everyday objects or mundane life. I still don’t think I had found a clear path, and though my work was full of ideas, I wasn’t very careful about the final presentation. The three-year course suited me. It was very experimental and open to students trying things out. There were end of year reviews but I don’t remember ever being stressed about anything other than the end of course degree show. Of course, the experience of living away from home and in beautiful Edinburgh was great. I think I learned just as much about myself and the world from simply leaving home and living elsewhere.

I was then offered the chance to do a one-year post-graduate course in the same department. They said it was up to me what I did, so I decided to make some of my unusual invention drawings into real 3D objects. These included a bed that had a mattress cut in the shape of a sleeping person. The idea is that you only need that part of the bed when asleep. I had a sense for the absurd yet logical, and I could express it through drawings.

In terms of influences other than those mentioned, probably Ron Arad who is a famous artist, designer and architect. He led the design products course at the RCA that I was on in 2000. Like many people who get to the top of their profession, he was extremely confident, decisive and without fear. He was very much in tune with his instincts and direct in his feedback to students. This experience of being around
Ron, even only briefly, tends to rub off on you. It opens up your horizons and ambitions by seeing someone with a ‘just do it’ mentality. It’s a bit like living in a small town and then meeting someone who has travelled the world and is telling you about all the things he has seen and done on his travels. You start to think that anything is possible.

What was the first thing you invented?

My first object drawing that I remember was the bed with a mattress cut in the shape of a sleeping person. The idea is that you only need part of the bed when asleep, I had a sense for the absurd yet logical, and I could express it through drawings.

To what extent did your family life influence your creating processes?

My parents are highly influential on my work; my father is a fun, playful component and a more thoughtful nod towards future technologies and sustainable travel. My mother is very much the opposite of my dad in personality terms. She is not the extrovert that my dad is, but a great observer and listener of people, always thinking the best in people. My parents have always been supportive in what I wanted to do, even when they didn’t initially understand and what type of creative path I was going down. I think my personality is a mix of my mother’s thoughtful, observing nature and my dad’s sense of playful provocation.

I find your description of your parents evocative, and those different – yet complementary – attributes definitely come through in your creative practice. For example, Streamer Glass Driverless Sleeper Car has both a fun, playful component and a more thoughtful nod towards future technologies and sustainable travel. Which piece of work or project best represents the two parental attributes you describe?

My father would probably be represented by the Smoothie Making Postbox. It was an idea that came out of a quick project I did to make something creative every day for 30 days in a row. The idea being that you put fruit inside a waterproof camping bag that fits inside a football. You kick the football around and then pour out the contents for a healthy and delicious drink. My dad played lots of sport and his sense of humour and sense for the absurd probably can be found in that idea somewhere.

The work that represents my mother’s observational side is possibly the Luxury Skimming Stone. I collected 20 skimming stones on a shoreline and then covered them in gold leaf and made leather belt buckles so you can carry it around until the perfect moment. It was a project about value, and what is valuable. We know there is monetary value but even more than that are things like time, or anticipation. I wrote a short story about a person who had carried their stones for 22 years, two months and one day, and then suddenly found themselves in front of the perfect lake for skimming stones. Was now the time? Will it skim or just plop into the water?

The observing of the everyday and turning that into something valuable in all senses is something I probably picked up from my mother.

Which piece of work is your favourite, and why?

I don’t think I have a favourite work, as they are all quite diverse, so it’s difficult to compare. I’m excited about my project called Little Inventors where we ask primary children to think up invention ideas and then ask skilled makers to make the most ingenious ideas into real things for exhibition. It seems to be very popular and we are just starting to roll it out now into schools around the world: littleinventors.org.

Is the Little Inventors project a conscious decision to encourage active participation in art and design in the classroom? If not, how did Little Inventors come about?

The Little Inventors project comes at a time when our subject is struggling for recognition in the school curriculum in both primary and secondary education, and fewer boys are opting to take visual arts qualifications than girls in secondary school. How do you feel about that? It’s disappointing that boys are not taking up visual arts qualifications in high numbers. It’s also true that girls seem to not follow engineering careers in the same numbers as boys. I hope that Little Inventors will encourage both genders to find their passion within the broad arena of ‘inventing’. It is a place where art and science meet and ideas grow.

How important do you think access to the visual arts and design is for children?

I think it’s so important for children to have access to the visual arts for many reasons. Taking part in the visual arts is great for our emotional wellbeing, because we can express our inner thoughts and share them with others in ways that words can sometimes struggle to do. There are also many practical benefits in everyday life. For example, being able to communicate your ideas visually is a very useful skill to have. I’ve been in enough meetings to know that a sketch can sometimes be far more effective in clear communication than an hour of spoken words.

Design informs everything in our lives, from the clothes we wear and the objects we use, to the buildings we work within and the services we rely on. Everything is designed nowadays. It’s so important that children understand what design is and how it can transform lives. I think there is a lack of understanding publicly of how influential design has become on everyone’s life and how good design can improve things dramatically. It’s about making things work well and making life better.
The power of art to improve children’s mental health

With many children missing out on crucial mental health support, The Art Room’s chief executive Lisa Harker explains how the charities’ nine studios are using art to help vulnerable children manage anxiety, grow in confidence and develop the necessary social skills to thrive in life.

A seven-year-old girl approaches The Art Room, anxiety etched across her face. As she reaches the threshold, a practitioner extends a hand to greet her – the first of many steps intended to make the girl feel at ease. She’s encouraged to sit down in the sofa area with six of her peers who are also attending The Art Room for the first time.

Once everyone is seated and settled, one of the practitioners welcomes each child by name and introduces the theme for the day’s session. He picks up a storybook and as he reads, he pauses at every page to explore an idea or spark discussion. One by one, the attention of each member of the group is piqued and they begin to find their voice, expressing their views and feelings. The group then moves to a dining table where toast, fruit and juice is shared – an exercise in cooperation, as well as nourishment – before the children don shirts and aprons to start their art work. The little girl is now quietly smiling as she picks up a brush ready to start creating.

That the process of art making has therapeutic benefits is hardly news; its value has been recognised for centuries. What The Art Room does, however, is integrate this philosophy into mainstream education settings.

The charity was established 15 years ago by an inspiring pioneer, Juli Beattie OBE. Working with vulnerable children over many years, she observed how art could transform children’s confidence and self-belief. The charity started out as a small project with children sitting around a kitchen table in Juli’s home. Now, The Art Room is working with over 500 children a week across 40 schools in Oxfordshire, London and Edinburgh.

The charity operates out of nine Art Room ‘studios’, each located in either a primary or secondary school. As well as providing sessions for students at the host school, the studios are also open to other schools nearby.

Each studio is carefully designed and kitted out. On entering you immediately notice how inspiring and joyful it feels. There are colourful pictures everywhere, paint-splattered tablecloths, jars of jewel-like beads and buttons, and numerous shades of acrylic paint to spark a child’s imagination. It’s carefully designed so children feel safe in the space. The sofa area is comfortable and cozy; art materials can be easily accessed, and children are free to experiment with paints without fear of making a mess.

During sessions, art is used as a vehicle for therapeutic work and an opportunity for self-expression. Each art project involves transforming an everyday object, such as a chair, box or lampshade, into a work of art that can be taken home by a child as a permanent reminder of their achievement. The process of making these works of art gives each child an opportunity to explore their identity, feelings and creativity, while also facilitating subtle therapeutic work throughout the session. On top of this, turning a mundane item into a breathtaking piece of art is a perfect metaphor for the transformation children can experience during their time with The Art Room.

A typical first project will involve transforming a plain wooden clock face into a self-portrait. Later, a clock mechanism is added so children can take home a fully functioning clock. The end product is valued but the process itself matters even more. As they design and paint the clock face each child starts to open up about him or herself, enabling the Art Room practitioners to begin the process of structuring the support each child needs to build their confidence, self-expression and social skills.

The children who attend The Art Room are referred by their school because of a concern about their emotional wellbeing or behaviour, which in turn is affecting their ability to learn. Typically, a child might be socially withdrawn and finding it difficult to participate, or they might be ‘acting out’ and disrupting life in the classroom. Their behaviour may be the consequence of turmoil in their lives, bereavement, family difficulties, or because they have a learning disability. Whatever the root causes of their behaviour and emotional turmoil, time in The Art Room enables children to build on their current interests, skills and knowledge.

‘At a time when there is almost daily national handwringing about the state of children’s mental health in the UK, the contribution of The Art Room and similar organisations is more vital than ever’
Each session lasts around two hours and children attend once a week during school hours. Most take part for at least a term and sometimes longer. Over several weeks, sometimes months, children become less anxious and more self-assured and socially competent. Each child’s progress is carefully tracked and shared with their school as part of an ongoing dialogue to share insights.

This close relationship with the school is vital, not only for The Art Room to understand the needs of each individual child, but also to make sure the positive impact of The Art Room endures when children return to classrooms. It is also the reason The Art Room invests in training other professionals in its practice, for example their teachers, teaching assistants or other professionals. A partnership with Bath Spa University has lead to the development of a Postgraduate Certificate in Art Room practice and a range of training courses to suit busy professionals who want to gain the practical skills they need to help children with emotional or behavioural difficulties.

The impact of The Art Room is carefully measured. Before each child begins attending The Art Room, they are assessed using a well-regarded screening tool – the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. The assessment is then repeated when they finish. The tool provides an indication of a child’s level of difficulty in terms of their behaviour, tendency towards hyperactivity, ability to form positive relationships with their peers, consideration to others and their overall emotional wellbeing.

The latest data shows that 65 per cent of all children who attend (and 73 per cent of those who present with severe problems) see an improvement in one or more of these characteristics during their time with The Art Room.

At a time when there is almost daily national handwringing about the state of children’s mental health in the UK, the contribution of The Art Room and similar organisations is more vital than ever. It is estimated that one in ten children have a diagnosable mental health disorder – an average of three in every classroom. In the past decade we have seen an escalation in many critical problems, such as self-harm, eating disorders, anxiety and depression. Children with poor mental wellbeing find it harder to learn, to develop healthily (physically as well as mentally), and to form relationships.

And since 75 per cent of mental ill health begins before a person is 18 years old, improving mental wellbeing in childhood is essential. If we want to improve mental health in society as a whole.

Despite the obvious imperative to act, the services that are expected to respond are overwhelmed due to the rising demand. Children’s mental health services are turning away almost one in four of the children referred to them by teachers and GPs. Even when a child is accepted into a service, they face a wide variation in waiting times and have only a limited chance of receiving anything more than very short-term support.

Meanwhile The Art Room offers an effective and cost-effective approach, working with schools to identify children who could benefit from the project and acting swiftly to stop problems from escalating. When children join The Art Room session draws to a close the children return to the sofa area in order to reflect on their own and others’ work. It is an opportunity for them to contemplate what they have achieved as individuals and as a group, marking every step of their Art Room journey. This time also helps them acknowledge the steps they have made as individuals, their concentration, perseverance, willingness to show kindness to others and so on. These conversations reinforce the sense that each child is valued for who they are.

It is this connection between art and therapy that is embodied in work of The Art Room. In his BBC Reith Lecture, Grayson Perry reflected on his first-hand experience of witnessing Art Room practice: ‘I loved The Art Room because it seemed to formalise my own take on the relationship of therapy and art. It is a relationship that is often recognised in the art world, and now The Art Room is helping others to see its value too.’

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You’re a lifesaver

With the reported rise in teenage mental health issues and self-confidence among young people at its lowest levels in a decade, Graham Hooper, photography teacher at Peter Symonds College in Winchester, looks at how these problems can be uniquely addressed through art education.

I am not an art therapist. Beyond what was covered on my PGCE, and since then on any professional development courses, I have received no formal training in dealing with teenage mental health issues. If my 20 years’ experience of being a personal tutor is any indication, cases are increasing in number and severity. In my pastoral role I’ve supported students suffering mild anxiety about exams at one extreme, and attempted suicides at the other – and that’s not good. Research carried out by The Prince’s Trust earlier this year, and reported on the BBC, found young people ‘fear for their future’, with their year, and reported on the BBC, found young people ‘fear for their future’, with their

I know that studying art, and teaching the subject now, has made me who I am. Designing and making certainly – that hands on, visceral relationship with materials and process – but also coming face-to-face with art in galleries and museums allows me to understand my place in the world, to see the humanity that is possible.

The subject as key
I tell my students on day one that there is no feedback, no marking, no correction – and no walk-down written exam. Our subject is very different to most – it thinks and feels. Students sense that very quickly, which can provide release. Hampered by levels of literacy or numeracy, for instance, a pupil can achieve where otherwise they might not.

The subject is also special because I think it recognises and rewards humanity, frankly. The assessment criteria (and there are many) allude to the skills we want in the well-rounded human beings. We want adults in any walk of life to be focussed, investigative and reflective. Whatever the career, we’ll need employers and employees who are discerning, observant and reflective. So when I’m asked the question, ‘As the teacher I won’t travel for them but they’re the ones who hang around in their lunch hour working away, the ones who never question the value or use of it all. They will empathise and can share their own experiences. They can point out the trapdoors and facilitate. The good art teacher is in a position to support and challenge in just the right combination, to affirm the student’s self-worth but also raise their aspirations. We can point out the obstacles as well as the shortcuts. We prepare, introduce and facilitate. So art and design education can provide a service for many that is precious and important, beyond the curriculum, even if it isn’t in our job description. The students don’t need to be on the brink of a breakdown to benefit either. It’s preventative rather than reactive.

The class as fellow travellers
As the teacher I won’t travel for them but they must know that I can’t do all the work for them. Each stage is their stage, every pin is their achievement. Knowing that the route has been trodden by countless others before them can be a comfort. Understanding that others in the room are at various points on that same path is helpful too. They will empathise and can share perceptions that will be relevant.

The studio as sanctuary
The art department was a place where I was at college when I could always find people like me. However different I might have felt to others in my cohort – because of musical tastes or hair colour – in the art room we were somehow all on the same side. I understood each other. I was safe and free, and I could spend time productively in the company of sympathetic friends. That meant a lot to me, and it still has the feeling that I am a member of a secret club.

The course as journey
The trajectory of an art project mirrors life generally, so they become metaphorical for each other. There are ups and downs, dead ends and digressions. We have choices and make decisions; we meet obstacles and overcome them. It is a process of navigation, with the help of others. Interestingly, students can also come to the realisation that although the journey is a constant and unchanging, as one line is etched into another, it is ultimately a solo mission, even if there is a co-pilot in the early training flights.

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12 Cross-phase

'Something that differs significantly in form young people, that the arts can bring forms of learning, opening up new ways of the arts’ ability to generate and promote gains for art education where the experiences and contributions of disabled people are more fully recognised and valued.'

As part of their daily classroom, studio or workshop at the Institute of Education (UCL) and the MA Art Education and Art Education and Practice at Birmingham City University, Dr Claire Penketh is principal lecturer and head of department for Disability and Education at Liverpool Hope University. Dr Penketh is an external examiner for a course that offers rich experiences for its students. My role encourages alternative ways of being and doing.

In one example students described a lesson where pupils developed alien bodies in response to work by Yinka Shonibare. Here the initial project explored identity and the idea of the other. Students recognised some limitations in the project in making assumptions about fine motor skills, prioritising the visual over tactile and their starting point, which compared a ‘normal’ body to the imagined alien being. They also noted that they were restricted in discussing disability as an aspect of Shonibare’s identity, although issues relating to race and postcolonialism were more fully explored with pupils. In the revised project the group explored a greater range of technical processes, as well as visual nature of the project, use of language and an exploration of different bodies, as well as the inclusion of a discussion of the relevance of disability and identity to Shonibare’s work. Students recognised that they could explore the relevance of disability with pupils rather than doubting their own being. They also noted the gap was not understood by pupils to identify with bodies unlike their own. Imagery of a wider range of alternatives enabled students to consider their projects and the underlying purpose of the activities as they had previously imagined. The revised project engaged with difference in questioning what was understood to be ‘normal’, encouraging students to consider what enables people to identify with bodies other than their own. The revised project also avoided the assumption that people with disabilities are less valuable.

As well as their roles as Head of Department for Disability and Education at Liverpool Hope University, MA Art Education and Art Education and Practice at Birmingham City University, Dr Claire Penketh is principal lecturer and head of department for Disability and Education at Liverpool Hope University. Dr Penketh is an external examiner for a course that offers rich experiences for its students. My role encourages alternative ways of being and doing.

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A vision for drawing

In order to teach drawing to blind and visually impaired students at New College Worcester, Nicola Currie, head of art and design, revisited American art educationalist Betty Edwards’ structured approaches to drawing. Here, Nicola describes the varied processes used and vibrant results achieved

If drawing is a way of responding to the visual world, how can this be taught to children and young people who are blind and visually impaired? I revisited with this question when I began work at New College Worcester, a secondary college for blind and visually impaired students.

The challenge became more acute when the examination boards gave an increased prominence to art and design. Examination boards gave an increased prominence to a secondary college for blind and visually impaired students when I began work at New College Worcester.

If drawing is a way of responding to the visual world, this led to the development of a secondary college for blind and visually impaired students at New College Worcester for drawing. Art and design, revisited American art educationalist Betty Edwards’ structured approaches to drawing. Here, Nicola describes the varied processes used and vibrant results achieved.

Nicola Currie, head of art and design, revisited American art educationalist Betty Edwards’ structured approaches to drawing. This led to the development of a secondary college for blind and visually impaired students at New College Worcester.

The outreach potential of this research is clear. New College Worcester offers free training to teachers and learning support assistants working with children and young people with a visual impairment.

The emotional and motivational aspects of the drawing course

In many ways, it is difficult to measure the emotional and motivational aspects of a piece of work, even though this was an important part of my research. A student’s motivation for drawing could affect the way that the teaching is received in future years. The student evaluations made it clear that enthusiasm was very similar to teaching with a sighted group of students. Teaching was very similar to teaching with a sighted group of students.

The outreach potential of this research is clear. New College Worcester offers free training to teachers and learning support assistants working with children and young people with a visual impairment.

For the students in this research group, their visual impairment did not define the content of the programme but did inform its delivery. Because the students were able to choose the materials, focal length of objects and format for the exercises, the students themselves worked to overcome some of the visual challenges they face in drawing.

A comparison of the drawings done by the students in their initial assessment and in their later portfolio of work demonstrated a clear development and improvement of their skills. It was important that students recognised that different methods work for different people, and so I was offering a pick and mix selection of methods to explore. The outreach potential of this research is clear. New College Worcester offers free training to teachers and learning support assistants working with children and young people with a visual impairment.

These results were very similar to teaching with a sighted group of students. Teaching was very similar to teaching with a sighted group of students.
Sarah Meader, teacher of art and design at St Aidan’s Church of England High School, Harrogate, discovers how taking risks in class by encouraging ‘mindless doodling’ can create exciting and surprising results.

What creates good mindfulness and an atmosphere of wellbeing? At home it is a comfortable environment with good music and a pad of paper with a pen. It’s a simple way to manage my own wellbeing as a busy and tired art and design teacher.

At school, however, a sense of pressure and gloominess was emerging. Increasing moans about the number of assessments being set and the importance of hitting target grades filled the air. Sound familiar? But these were not teachers talking in our staffrooms, but the pupils, the same young people in whom we strive to promote a love of learning and provide a safe and stimulating learning environment.

And I too was feeling the pressure to complete a scheme of learning for year 8 (ages 12–13), assess it, feedback and begin the cycle again. It was time for a change.

The next, already planned, scheme of learning was scrapped. Instead, with the class, we discussed alternatives to improve our mindfulness and our wellbeing. Much like myself and, I am sure many of you, pupils shared that music, background videos and mindless doodling often helps.

Initially this began as a one-off lesson, an hour to simply unwind and forget the assessments set for the week. We put on some pop music we could all sing along to, had a general chat about things we enjoy in our own time, as well as current news and events from around the world, and before we knew it our pages were full of exciting shapes and marks and, for some, wonderful creatures and characters.

By the end of the lesson the class reminded me of the very reason I had chosen to teach art, and I experienced the invaluable impact that art can have on our young people. By simply doodling away without set expectations or outcomes, singing along to music and having a good chit-chat, the gloomy atmosphere had turned into a buzz of happy laughs and smiles.

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Instead of planning a scheme of learning ahead of time, it was clear that the class should guide the next steps. Their desire and need for ‘down time’ was too prominent to ignore. As a teacher I often talk to pupils about taking risks in their own work, so it was time for me to lead by example. I took away the focus of learning specific techniques and skills, and the focus of a specific outcome, and focussed on promoting a safe atmosphere to investigate the ways in which pupils could stop back and find calm. I wanted my pupils to engage in their own love of learning, and to identify areas of art and design that they enjoy as individuals.

The next lesson arrived and I had a group of beaming pupils standing at my door bombarding me with questions: ‘Miss, are we doodling again today? Miss, can we listen to music again? Miss, can we watch some doodle videos that I found?’ The enthusiasm was overwhelming.

As a class we began to explore the value of doodling, discussing how it can help each of us in different ways. For some it meant quiet-down time, for others it was a way of expressing things that are difficult to do so verbally, and for some it was simply a fun way of exploring art to suit their personalities.

Pupils were encouraged to consider a range of backgrounds and surfaces, such as spraying inks, splattering paint, marbling, dying fabric and more. There was little emphasis on learning the ‘correct processes’. I simply wanted them to enjoy playing with new materials. Each pupil explored a range of different doodle artists: Jon Burgerman, Kerby Rosanes, Pic Candle and Zentangles, who could help if pupils found it difficult to put pen to paper. Each individual produced exciting, imaginative and personal responses.

A lasting highlight was the moment a young pupil approached me with the first smile he had worn in my classroom all year. It was a smile that confirmed my risks were successful. This young man had spent every art lesson previously stating ‘I’m no good at art, there’s no point, I can’t draw’, and now here he was, bouncing across the classroom, artwork clutched in his hands expressing how proud he was of what he had created—he actually wanted to take his work home! I am lucky enough that he agreed to let me borrow it for my display for a little longer. That even bigger grin is the very reason that doodling should be encouraged more frequently.

The power of the doodle should not be overlooked.

For some it meant quiet-down time, for others it was a way of expressing things that are difficult to do so verbally, and for some it was simply a fun way of exploring art to suit their personalities. 

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Like many in the world of post-16 education the last few years have seen me re-examining the question of my subjects relevance, particularly to a cohort who, while considering their degree and careers options, will only be taking three or four subjects.

The English Baccalaureate (Ebac), disregarding any form of arts subject in its five pillars, and the push for STEM subjects, has lead to a narrative of the arts being irrelevant to a student’s core knowledge, a luxury or an add on. How then do we as subject specialists ensure that we can convince those coming to us that what we offer is, in fact, the polar opposite; that it is relevant, useful and worthwhile?

The most common argument is to reference the UK’s creative industries and their huge contribution to the national purse. This is indeed an important argument and one that we should continue to make, but I have concerns about it being our first and, at times, only argument. Unintentionally we turn art and design education into a form of training, and while it is important lifeblood for the UK’s creative industries, training is a by-product rather than the sole purpose. It also suggests that art subjects are only there for people interested in creative careers. The result is that we miss out on many potential students and narrow the stream of people who have experience of art and design in education. Surely one of the most effective ways of putting arts subjects back on the national agenda is to ensure that the policy makers, business leaders and innovators of tomorrow study art and design and learn first hand its importance.

With all of this in mind I am going to use this space to do two things. Present a set of arguments for studying art and design and share a change to our first year programmes that has seen a significant impact on retention and rates of student satisfaction.

We create philosophers

On Karawa, the conceptual artist, paints the date, completing each work in a day. If he runs out of time he discards it. The result are many pieces, white paint on a flat black ground, simply stating a date, which once painted is an artefact of that day, a statement of On Karawa’s existence. As you look at the work you can’t help but wonder what you were doing on that very day; in some cases you may not have even been alive. Here you are faced with a work that reminds you, by the very nature of the six digits it holds, that you exist now but once did not and that one day you will not again.

Here is the art A-levels first powerful component, the ability to enable a student to start to understand themselves and their existence. Some of the most powerful and exciting works produced at post-16 come from students exploring issues relating to themselves and their family. The home, relationships, illness and ageing, physical and emotional health, are all subjects being explored up and down the country by young people, not yet out of their teens. Here is a subject that gives them freedom to carve out their own projects, their own curriculum, based on what is relevant and important to them.

"An exhibition becomes, rather than an end point, an opportunity to present our current findings, much like a scientist taking stock of their discoveries before deciding where those discoveries should lead next."
We create researchers
To accompany his 2010 exhibition at the Tate Britain Chris Ofili gave several interviews. In one he talked about the process of making, stating that “The studio is a laboratory, not a factory. An exhibition is the results of your experiments, but the process is never ending. So an exhibition is not a conclusion.” Within this idea an exhibition becomes, rather than an end-point, an opportunity to present our current findings, much like a scientist taking stock of their discoveries before deciding where those discoveries should lead next. It becomes a pause in the process, releasing the ‘final work’ from bearing all the responsibility of value judgment.

This is much the same for assessing A-level submissions with the ‘sketchbook’ work; or the process; generating 75 per cent of the final grade at AS and 80 per cent at A-level under the new specification. This balancing of value within a student’s submission suggests that our current way of teaching and assessing art is in line with the notion of research and the discipline of experimentation and delaying conclusions until a number of avenues are explored. Students and embed the discipline of experimentation and delaying conclusions until a number of avenues are explored. Students and embed the discipline of experimentation and delaying conclusions until a number of avenues are explored.

We create leaders
For many years I worked with a teacher who, when not wishing to enrol a student onto her course, would suggest art – after all her subject was content heavy. This phrase used to iritate me as the suggestion was quite obvious. However I now embrace it as a code. In fact art subjects are not content light they are content empty.

Our students need to demonstrate their ability across four assessment objectives. They do not have to study the Impressionists or Modernism, or answer questions on Pablo Picasso or Tracy Emin. They have to identify a theme and related artists, designers and makers from which they select media and produce imagery. They have to demonstrate a developing understanding and craftsmanship in all of these, and do so in a logical and coherent way. They must lead and drive their projects, determining what is right each and every week, and conclude it all within a time frame.

This set of requirements should not be underestimated. While frameworks and good practice can be shared, students bear a high level of responsibility for the success of their enquiries. While common themes are responded to, the very best work comes from students clear on their point of interest and able to manage their developing work.

Here is a subject that gives them freedom to carve out their own projects, their own curriculum, based on what is relevant and important to them.

And so
Next time we are faced with doubt or questions over our subject we must remember that we produce art students as well as philosophers, researchers and leaders. Our students have great responsibility over their education; they are skilled in informed decision-making and are disciplined as they revisit and refine work. Surely any subject would be proud of that.

The first project
Now we have the cry, we need the students. It was clear that at Ludlow College, after our 2014–15 recruitment, that several years of declining art numbers would not turn around on their own. We revisited every aspect of our provision leading to some significant changes, and this year we have seen a 20 per cent increase in numbers across the department despite a fall in the local demographic.

There are two ways to increase numbers, through recruitment and retention. Recruitment is often tied up with college-wide initiatives and so harder to effect. However, with our early retention in need of improvement the initial sessions were reviewed. The objective was to create a short three-week project that aided students’ transition from school to college, made them familiar with key elements of the art and design department, and led to a completed piece of work they could be proud of. We first trialled this in Photography. With the biggest decreases in numbers we felt it had the most chance of regaining ground.

Students were introduced to the work of David Bailey and Irving Penn. Using costumes, both the colleges and their own, they recreated some of the iconic images. Students were then shown a few effective editing processes on Photoshop to bring out the detail and tonal range of their work, thus allowing them to become familiar with what for some is a daunting program. Students were then sent back to the shooting/phase to create work that echoed rather than imitated the source material.

This is where the world begins, allowing for a more personal take. Each student selected a collection of images to frame, which were then curated and hung in the college’s gallery.

This project has been run for three years now and since its introduction we have minimal students leaving Photography. The few who have gone are usually those who choose to leave education completely, and many who start in Photography then discover they are better suited for one of our other art pathways. Displaying the work in frames and producing simple exhibition invites the students a genuine sense of excitement and achievement, marking their arrival at college.

With the success of this project we have looked to introduce similar approaches across all pathways. Within graphics we have a simple Business project that covers elements of the movement, the introduction of the Principles of Design and a collection of worksheets that guide students through the basics of Photoshop and that leads to a final set of postage stamp designs. The work is clearly guided and aimed to give students a quick outcome to be proud of. This early sense of achievement is key to engagement, to hooking them, while embedding the expectations of a longer project.

Weekly targets and expectations should not be lowered; these projects are not soft start but a supported one. Expectations being high from the start are essential to ensure students are not surprised by the reality of A-levels but instead excited by the possibilities.

With the mini intro project now a feature in all our pathways, our early retention is excellent. While it is one initiative in many, it has been instrumental in changing a morose, relevant department for our students from the moment they arrive.

Below Alice Gillett, responses to the Braque graphics brief
Left Henry McNab, an experimental and personal response to the initial brief

dadybludollcollege.ac.uk
instagram.com/ludlowcollege_art

We were born this way
WE ARE THE NEW YOUTH

Below
Alec Gilmour, responses to the Braque graphics brief

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Alec Gilmour, responses to the Braque graphics brief
As the lead body for art history in the United Kingdom, the Association for Art History (AAH) plays a key role in championing both the professional practice and public understanding of the subject. As an organisation we aim to represent and support both the subject and those involved in its delivery, and for many years have had an active teacher group and extended network of teaching professionals across subjects and UK regions.

The announcement back in October 2016 by the exam board AQA of their intention to discontinue GCE A- and AS-level in History of Art in England was incredibly worrying. So for us the threat of losing the A-level has a long and important history,

recognised by parents, teachers and universities as a benchmark qualification. Like many others we believe that the A-level is a keystone of post-16 education, particularly so for young people wishing to study and engage with art history and visual culture at undergraduate level and beyond.

This may go some way to explaining why the announcements regarding the possible discontinuation of GCE History of Art triggered such unprecedented support for our subject, within and beyond education; a level of media coverage, political engagement and public petitioning which has scarcely – if ever – been witnessed for art history.

We estimate that over 25,000 people signed petitions to save the subject. National and international publications and websites were still covering the news two months after it first broke. Over 200 leading academics, museum directors and cultural leaders from the UK and around the world lobbied for its reinstatement.

The qualification’s importance – along with the impact and consequences of its loss – was even highlighted as part of a House of Lords debate on ensuring exam boards continue to offer creative subjects at A-level.

As an organisation we believe – along with many colleagues and stakeholders across the creative and education sectors – that this level of support shows the continued importance and relevance of the subject. The new GCE specification enables us to champion the study of art history as an important opportunity for learning and insight.

The continued offer of a GCE, alongside the Cambridge Pre-U certificate, Extended Project Qualifications (EPQs) and other subject opportunities means that art history education will remain a vibrant field of study, and offers students the chance to engage with the world through a lens of art, culture and creative practice.

The fall and rise of A-level History of Art

Trevor Horsewood, campaigns manager at the Association for Art History, explains why the potential loss of GCE A and AS-levels in History of Art mattered, and how the subject offers students a chance to engage with the world through a lens of art, culture and creative practice.

As part of this work we aim to build meaningful, long-term strategic relationships with colleagues in both formal and informal education, such as teachers, lecturers, art’s bodies, galleries and museums, policy-makers and advocacy bodies. We have already developed relationships with higher education institutions in some areas, with the aim of developing 12 new art history in education networks between 2017 and 2019. Over the next two years the campaign will work with higher education and museum and gallery partners around the country to support students in the arts and cultural sectors, as well as those involved in other interdisciplinary and cross-curriculum opportunities at both GCSE and GCE AS and A-level.

Our new website Thinking About Art, along with our textbook of the same name, provides a framework for our formal education work, acting as a subset of an overarching ‘art history for all’ campaign ambition. The website thinkingaboutart.org.uk is designed to encourage people to think differently about art history and provide a range of teaching and learning resources suitable for key stage 3, 4 and 5 levels 11–18. We’re working with teachers and subject specialists such as gallery educators to develop and share exemplar resources, showcasing new material in partnership with colleagues from universities and galleries across the UK. We’re also hoping to develop our international networks in line with different resources and critical approaches, all of which helps encourage us to think and act differently.

Longer term we hope to develop new projects within primary settings, but in the next two years we also want to encourage students to consider art history as an option by introducing them to the field earlier in their secondary school journey and across a range of different subjects.

We are confident that recent events signal the start of a new era for the study of global art history and visual culture in the UK, an era typified by a more inclusive and diverse approach to the subject, reaching out to schools and learners in new ways and in new places.

The new specification will allow us to build upon the successes of the previous A-level, whilst developing new approaches to understanding art history and visual cultures, and discovering new abilities, skills and modes of inquiry.

We believe that those studying or learning about art history have a unique opportunity to engage with and to think differently about the world around them, understanding its histories, cultures and societies through arts, objects and materials. Through this, students can gain valuable and sought-after research and analytical skills that will help in a range of future careers within and outside the arts.

As we work towards securing the future of the subject, our collaborations with partners and teachers across many other sectors and subjects remain vital to guaranteeing the long-term prosperity of cultural education within the UK.

Get Involved

We want to strengthen the networks we’ve building around the country. Find out more about these on the thinkingaboutart.org.uk website on the networks page. We would also love to talk with anyone who is working in any of these target areas, or indeed anyone who is interested in art history, visual culture and thinking about art.

If you’re interested in finding out more about how your school can get involved to suggest resources and links that you think we should know about, please drop us a line at: education@aaah.org.uk

If you’re on twitter you can follow us via @AAHeducation for the latest art history and education news at: thinkingaboutart.org.uk

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Dogs and the art of undoing

Caroline Whelan, faculty leader for creative and performing arts, took inspiration from her rescue dog to present an art textiles project that would defy the stereotype of the subject. Here, she describes the process.

“We’re ‘doing’ fruit’. This description of a project not only fills me with dread, but also worries me. What are we doing? More importantly what are we ‘learning’? Are we not experimenting, investigating, creating, designing, exploring, crafting and, most importantly, promoting the ability to take risks?

I lead a large department in Heath Park School, Wolverhampton, where we strive to offer the broadest, highest quality art and design curriculum we can achieve. The senior leadership in the school is very supportive of all the creative subjects and I am given the freedom to offer the curriculum that is most appropriate to the students. Staff have a diverse range of specialisms, and current course materials available cover the whole range of disciplines from unendorsed art and design, towards specialist art textiles.

As a specialist in art textiles, I am regularly trying to give the students an exciting experience accessible to all. Although we still have classes of just girls, and there can be the stereotypical view that the subject is about sitting at a sewing machine all day, it’s safe to say that this does not occur in our department.

I last inherited a class at the turn of the academic year; a mixed-ability group aged 14–15, some of whom were expecting to start making clothes. I have this conversation many times at options evening, yet still the question is always raised: ‘When are we making clothes?’

I try to steer them away from this obsession I was really keen to give them a project they could all get their teeth into and enable them to experience the subject in a way that they previously hadn’t. This meant working in three-dimensions.

The inspiration for the project – and I have to give credit here – is to my rescue Staffie, Joseph, who we acquired from a stray dogs’ home in Shropshire. Seeing the range of abandoned dogs behind bars, all with a different character and all with a different background, is heart breaking. But surely the dogs were taking shape.

Weekends during this time were spent visiting charity shops, collecting anything that looked like it could be useful, wool, string, mud heads, leather handbags for noses, fur trim from hoods, hat and old dog collars. The quality of the resources also had a huge impact on the work, and each week the students spent time selecting from the range of fabrics and odd and sods my partner and I had spent Saturday searching for. Mop heads were dismantled, leather bags were pulled apart, and hats cut up.

Students were investing time considering what would work, what needed dying, and what texture cost would their individual dog have. This led to each dog developing a unique character, which revealed a bit more of itself each week. The quality and cost of resources in school catalogues has always frustrated me and by contrast I have always enjoyed seeking out ‘stuff’. Encouraging students to dig out and source also led to greater engagement in the project and a greater sense of ownership. Sourcing should be part of the creative journey.

There can be some reluctance from students to produce work which takes time to refine and evolve, and this comes from an aversion to making mistakes. As a subject, art and design is in a privileged position where we can encourage experimentation and only taking without students being afraid of failure. And getting students to invest time and effort is important throughout the creative learning experience.

The dogs were created, collars were selected, eye colours chosen, and names were considered; Bailey, Diana, some still undecided. The students developed a fondness for their textile dogs and even got a session in the photography studio.

As wire mesh was formed into initial crude shapes, the students developed a great deal of resilience and injuries were kept to a minimum, apart from scratched hands and the accompanying major blood loss!

The project begun with students researching animal charities, which led to them exploring a range of two-dimensional media. They investigated form, colour and shape, and began developing a familiarity with different types of dogs and their unique characteristics. Artist research was important, as this would allow them to visualise what was ahead. I showed them the work of Barbara Franc and Will Kurtz amongst others.

We needed to see how ideas could evolve from two to three-dimensions, and this was the biggest challenge. As wire mesh was formed into initial crude shapes, the students developed a great deal of resilience and injuries were kept to a minimum, apart from scratched hands and the accompanying ‘major blood loss’. Admittedly during these lessons I did consider abandoning the whole idea, as students struggled with proportion and joining the mesh, and some were looking like they were ready to give up as their hands became sore from bending and shaping.

This was soon forgotten as time went on, progress was made and somewhat crude mesh heads were covered with paper mache. Slowly but surely the dogs were taking shape.

We needed to see how ideas could evolve from two to three-dimensions. This led to each dog developing a unique character, which revealed a bit more of itself each week. The quality and cost of resources in school catalogues has always frustrated me and by contrast I have always enjoyed seeking out ‘stuff’. Encouraging students to dig out and source also led to greater engagement in the project and a greater sense of ownership. Sourcing should be part of the creative journey.

I think I have achieved what I set out to do. There seems to be better engagement with the subject, a better understanding of what art textiles are all about, and the outcomes have promoted resilience, thoroughness and resourcefulness. I say to my students when they demonstrate a fear of failure: ‘What’s the worst thing that can happen? Undone the ‘doing’ and enjoy the creative journey.”
created miniatures using sensory curator and multisensory art making. Hangs A Tale exhibition explored William Shakespeare, marking the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare through Pigments: Plots, Players and Shakespearean figures. This exercise created assuming the gait and posture of various historically rooted activities. The first was a ball to each other and were asked to name a their knowledge of Shakespeare, students threw into an extensive kit of sensory building blocks consisting of:

- 20 individual speakers with unique sounds. The sounds included waves, children playing, a crackling fire, car traffic, a storm and dance music.
- 11 glass bottles containing different synthetic and natural fragrances. The bottles contained a wide variety of smells from curry, dirt and motor oil, to lavender and coffee.
- 11 individual tastes. These included Christmas pudding, fresh mint and Jelly Belly’s beer, as well as grass, marshmallow and toothpaste.

‘These multisensory backgrounds created a unique relationship between artist and audience’

Students quickly realised that, creating breast colours with a smooth consistency from raw materials was an art in itself, and that the bright yellows, oranges and blues, which are popular today, were not easily achievable using historical methods and materials. To emphasise the precious nature of certain pigments in Tudor times, pupils were given a very small amount of synthetic vermilion and small, and large quantities of lamp black, synthetic lead white, burnt umber, green earth and four ochres sourced from the Cleared Caves in the Forest of Dean. Here, it is worth mentioning that my rationing of small wasn’t entirely historically accurate because this pigment was cheap and freely available in the 16th and 17th centuries. However, I felt that distributing small in this way did help to create an authentic art-making experience. Today this pigment is extremely expensive and to buy and difficult to find, much like ultramarine in Tudor times.

Having painted their self-portraits on miniature canvases, the students were asked to create a sensory background for their portrait to accompany their work. This exercise was a contemporary nod to the historical practice of using the background, together with foreground props, to contextualise the sitter and to convey social, economic and religious status and personality traits. Each student was given access to an extensive kit of sensory building blocks consisting of:

- 20 individual speakers with unique sounds. The sounds included waves, children playing, a crackling fire, car traffic, a storm and dance music.
- 11 glass bottles containing different synthetic and natural fragrances. The bottles contained a wide variety of smells from curry, dirt and motor oil, to lavender and coffee.
- 11 individual tastes. These included Christmas pudding, fresh mint and Jelly Belly’s beer, as well as grass, marshmallow and toothpaste.

‘These multisensory backgrounds created a unique relationship between artist and audience’

Participants had been asked about allergies – and any foods they avoided for religious or ethical reasons – prior to the workshop. The ‘tastes’ used during the session were based on this information.

Workshop participants were then asked to combine these sensory building blocks by layering different sounds, smells and tastes to contextualise their character or highlight aspects of their personality. So, for example, by coupling the sound of waves and children playing, pupils could show that their character was at the beach. Adding the smell of seaweed and the taste of strawberry ice cream could evoke a hot, sunny day.

Many students paired their works with smells, sounds and tastes they liked. Clara’s piece, for example, was accompanied by dance music and toothpaste and Jelly Beans, thus immortalising her love of boogying and minty freshness. Chloe’s choice was also personal in nature. She adopted disco music, beer and Jelly Beans and the smell of motor oil, because when blended together they reminded her of her father.

Maya used the beer and Jelly Beans to make a different kind of statement. She layered smells, sounds and taste to evoke a physical environment. When coupled with the smell of oil and the noise of an owl hooting, the sweets, she said, helped to recreate a party in the forest at night.

Woodlands proved to be a popular setting in both workshops. It was interesting to see how students combined different sensory tools to evoke the same location. Alex, for example, accompanied his Othello-inspired portrait with the sound of a crackling fire, the smell of dirt and the taste of mint.

These multisensory backgrounds created a unique relationship between artist and audience, adding layers of meaning to the students’ portraits. However, they also added great complexity to the curators of the exhibition because the display of this type of art pitted artistic intention against total sensory overload! To address this I created two distinct displays.

The first enabled audiences to actively engage with multisensory art. Maya and Claudia’s works were placed on a separate table with two speakers, two scent bottles and two Jelly Bean dispensers, with instructions encouraging viewers to look at the pieces whilst smelling, tasting and hearing the sensory background. The second area displayed the other miniatures in long rows. Portraits were then grouped by smell and placed near one of three speakers playing sounds of dance music, a crackling fire and waves. This arrangement ensured that every work was accompanied by at least one of the young artists’ sensory choices and could be enjoyed individually without sensory overload.

Thereby Hangs A Tale set out to explore Shakespeare’s impact on contemporary culture through art making. Participants in these workshops used historical and contemporary tools and practice. The mixed pigments and the incorporation of sensory options led to engagement with Shakespeare and the production of innovative, high-quality pieces.
Primary ideas for art and maths

Karen Palmer, art and design specialist teacher at Wycliffe Primary in Shipley, uses artists’ work to explore how art can be inspired by maths. An exhibition showing progression across the school was one result. Here, she explains the process.

As a primary art and design specialist, I work with 11 classes and 330 children in Wycliffe Primary School, Shipley. Our inspirational maths week was an opportunity to explore how artists use maths to create art. With every class involved, our dining room exhibition became a helpful way of showing progression through both maths and art, from the youngest to the oldest students in the school.

For each project and year group we researched the work of a specific artist. Starting with Reception (ages 4–5), we looked at Leo Lionni’s Pezzettino, which means ‘little piece’ in Italian. The picture book uses shapes to create very simple characters. After reading the story, talking about all the characters within it, and using little pieces of squared paper arranged on paper they had painted for a background, pupils created their own characters and told little stories about them.

With year 1 (ages 5–6) I talked about Wassily Kandinsky and his painting ‘Squares with concentric circles’, and then the students watched my video demonstration of the making process.

With a square of paper each, which they folded in half and then into quarters to get four smaller squares, they then filled the squares with concentric circles. They used paint and thought carefully about which colours to use. By arranging the paintings together we created one big picture.

Year 2 (ages 6–7) focused on the artist Paul Klee and his painting ‘Circles and Sun’. After looking at the picture and discussing what they could see, their challenge was to work in teams to create castles using 2D shapes. This was an opportunity to discuss the names and properties of shapes, and to create a 3D castle combining shapes and forms.

Each child then used a simple set of shape templates: a square, a large rectangle, an arch, a semi-circle, a triangle and a circle. They used these to create a castle picture.

Year 3 (ages 7–8) researched the artist Piet Mondrian. Working in teams, each group was given a reproducible printout of one of Mondrian’s works to discuss. This was an opportunity to discuss the names and properties of shapes, and to create a 3D castle combining shapes and forms.

Each child then used a simple set of shape templates: a square, a large rectangle, a thin rectangle, an arch, a semi-circle, a triangle and a circle. They used these to create a castle picture.

Year 3 (ages 7–8) researched the artist Piet Mondrian. Working in teams, each group responded to sets of questions relating to the artist’s work. The questions included:

- What do you see when you look at this painting?
- How do you think the artist was feeling when he painted this?
- How does it make you feel?
- What do you like about it? Why?
- Do you like it? Why?

For many of the projects and lessons I use the demonstration videos uploaded on my Karen Palmer YouTube channel: http://bit.ly/2kjDkg2. Videos can be a great aid to learning. Classes are able to see everything on our large screen and if I am teaching the same lesson to more than one class, which is often the case, I will show the films back to back or repeat the films anytime during the lesson. Some children watch their own and other classes’ videos at home – they’ve even made the work set for other year groups in their own time.

With every class involved, our dining room exhibition became a helpful way of showing progression through both maths and art, from the youngest to the oldest students in the school.

For example, in his ‘Four painting the artist used four different colours. The class went on to design their own number paintings with these connections in mind.

Year 5 (ages 9–10) focused on Robert Indiana’s number paintings. The project began by placing a selection of his pictures and prompt questions on each table. Individuals recorded their responses before sharing their ideas with the group. Next we compared both Charles Demuth’s ‘Stay the Figure Five in Gold’ and Robert Indiana’s painting of the figure five, displaying reproductions side by side. This was a good opportunity to see how artists are influenced by other artists.

Our research continued with the identification of patterns and connections in Indiana’s work. For example, in his ‘Four painting the artist used four different colours. The class went on to design their own number paintings with these connections in mind.

Year 5 (ages 9–10) built upon the artist Sonia Delaunay’s work. Again, we started by looking at examples of her work. We went on to use compasses: a challenge for some, but they all got the hang of it by the end of the two-hour lesson. This lesson engaged everyone, including the boys who were just as excited to complete their projects as the girls.

Year 6 (ages 10–11) researched Bridget Riley’s Op Art. Again, prompt questions and a mini-Riley image were presented for each student to record their responses. This resulted in everyone recording some really interesting ideas and observations.

This was also another project that engaged the boys. Although some of them found the measuring and detailed compass work challenging, they all persevered and succeeded in creating an Op Art inspired image.

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For many of the projects and lessons I use the demonstration videos uploaded on my Karen Palmer YouTube channel: http://bit.ly/2kjDkg2. Videos can be a great aid to learning. Classes are able to see everything on our large screen and if I am teaching the same lesson to more than one class, which is often the case, I will show the films back to back or repeat the films anytime during the lesson. Some children watch their own and other classes’ videos at home – they’ve even made the work set for other year groups in their own time.
Drawing is at the core of my pedagogy and formed the starting point for my research when completing an art and design in education masters at the Institute of Education. The belief that students’ understanding of drawing is embedded in drawing from observation led me to explore the concept that drawing is also more than this. I wanted to acknowledge traditional practice while applying emphasis to a conceptual approach, capturing what Marshall Downs describes as a ‘direct and physical process’, whilst testing my own limits when drawing.

The basis for many definitions of drawing begins with ‘line’. In his Pedagogical Sketchbook (1925), Paul Klee perceives drawing as ‘an active line on a surface’ (figs. 1 and 2). The movement of the transport I was using dictated the line drawings I created. I had in mind the essence of automatic drawing that the Surrealists were credited with establishing. In my attempts to research the dominance of observation in secondary school drawing, my practice developed what Alphen refers to as ‘free rein to the hand’.

With the aim of questioning the prevalence of observational drawing in secondary art education, Nicola Smith, head of art and design at St Helen’s School, London, set out to explore the concept and definitions of the medium. Here, she explains:

**References**


To expand my research I posed the question: If the surface for a drawing provides the space to draw on, how can this space be utilised to create a new learning experience for secondary students?

Elizabeth Murton writes that: ‘Space is thought of as active and constantly changing’.

This concept of space led me to consider how I might explore the lines I had created during my journeys. I wanted to give these lines a presence that went beyond the constraint of a two-dimensional surface, and I began to free the lines from the surface by cutting them out. This process transformed a scribble into something that, at least momentarily, appeared precious and crafted (fig. 3).

The lack of a drawn line on a surface seems to challenge how lines are traditionally used in drawing. The line is only noticeable in its absence or its position in space. This paradox offers opportunities to question how we ‘traditionally’ view line, and contemplation of this cutout method could, in turn, provide the freedom to develop transformative pedagogies.

My research began with the movement of the train, and Gesture continued to replace an integral part, whether drawing or cutting. It is the gesture captured by each work that increases its presence, a presence created by the maker learning their gestural traces. The materiality of each work cannot be ignored when discussing gesture. The chosen material to work with changes the gesture and therefore can influence how the work is read. A cutout created using paper has a different presence to one conceived using felt or carpet (figs. 4–6).

My investigation led to a consideration of the relationship between concept and gesture (making). Through making I have discovered that those two elements co-exist in my practice. This development led me to consider the prevalence of skill being favoured over concept in secondary education. I believe that this predilection needs to be analysed so that transformative knowledge can be generated through the relinquishing of control that teaching a set of skills demands. By encouraging an interaction between concept and gesture, transformation could be instigated.

I began my practice research with the aim to explore drawing and question the prevalence of, and for some the reliance on, observational drawing in secondary art education. In School Art Education: Mourning the Past and Opening a Future (GLARE, 2016) Donna Atkinson examines the spaces and contexts that will promote ‘encounters of learning’. If pedagogies are reliant on the transference and development of skill, then learning such encounters are less likely. Through studio practice I have tried to envisage away that students’ presence in such encounters, whilst still exploring formal elements and skills.

Students who are receiving instruction through a ‘transmission model’ of teaching, which places emphasis on skills, may have less opportunity to establish a more personal way of working. As a teacher I believe that it is our role to engage, inspire and encourage innate inventiveness with the aim to foster true ‘encounters of learning’. Ideas, experimentation and the enquiry of students need to be supported and expanded, not dictated with a fixed end point in mind. Teachers need to engage with students to begin to ‘un-work’ the limits which more traditional drawing practice can impose on ‘encounters of learning’.

These are all worthy sentiments, but engaging with an altered way of working that challenges habitual practices is not an easy route to travel. To question the conventions of school drawing I had to hold a mirror up to my own expectations as a teacher. In secondary school teaching there appears to be a pressure to produce a final response that is developed through preparation studios, which invariably begins with observational drawing. The drawing I created by travelling on various modes of transport challenged this approach; whilst the resulting cutouts were grounded in a highly crafted approach.

My making journey highlighted the importance of not discounting traditional approaches over more conceptual interpretations. The work I completed in the studio cemented this belief, and on reflection I could see that through practice I was acknowledging traditional processes, materials and techniques whilst trying to push through the boundaries that tradition can generate.

When this realisation is translated back into the classroom, it appears that a way forward does not need to discount all preceding practice in an attempt to instigate the ‘encounters of learning’ which Atkinson champions. These ‘encounters of learning’ might just as easily develop from a re-imagined practice.
Developing My Museum

In order to encourage and expose her pupils to community art projects, Nicola McCaffrey, art and design teacher at Kender Primary School, south London, arranged a visit to the local Peckham Multi-storey Car Park. Here she explains why.

As part of my motivation to expose and encourage the pupils at Kender Primary School to access community art projects, I arranged for year 5 cohort (ages 9-10) to visit the exhibition Agora by British artist Richard Wentworth at the local Peckham Multi-story Car Park. The car park is part of the Bold Tendencies project, a not-for-profit commissioning organisation, founded in 2007, led by Richard Wentworth’s Agora. By year 5’s discussion with the artist, and from Eye, an art collective based in London whose work focuses on contemporary forms of domesticity. Their 2015 installation Aspects of Change transformed the space of the car park through a series of interventions that use both language and imagery. Setting off from the Royal Academy of Arts on the seven-mile route through London, past Downing Street to the Royal Academy of Arts on the seven-mile route through London, past Downing Street to

The children were full of questions. Is it a car park? Is it a gallery? Why doesn’t it look like art? The question of whether a gallery is a space for art or a space for education is a common one. As a result of this visit, and the discussion and ideas generated by the children, we were asked to participate in Bold Tendencies’ new project My Museum.

My Museum asks children to use objects to tell their own stories, representing who they are and how they relate to their community. The curation was led by year 5 (ages 9-10). Objects were sourced from Bellenden Primary School, and individual works were created at Peckham Park Academy in collaboration with commissioned artists, and also chosen from a term-long project organised by Dulwich Hamlet Junior School. The theme ‘Home and Away’ drew inspiration from Richard Wentworth’s Agora, from year 5’s discussion with the artist, and from a project run by a local primary school in east London, which transformed a disused multi-storey car park into a space where a summer programme of visual art, architecture, music, theatre, film, and literature can be held.

‘The My Museum element provided understanding of the workings and development of a gallery space, providing a high level of engagement and organisation with a strong emphasis on contextual sources’

My Museum element provided understanding of the workings and development of a gallery space, providing a high level of engagement and organisation with a strong emphasis on contextual sources. It allowed pupils to take risks and even fail, modify or rethink their intentions, both for their artworks and exhibition curation. The project helped our children to think like artists, designers and curators and build more diverse outcomes. It equipped them to confidently articulate and evaluate their opinions about different aspects of the process. Their strong views on art encouraged students to make decisions and create a uniquely curated gallery space. They considered their role in society, learning about culture and heritage and their community.

From the outset My Museum challenged their assumptions of what a museum is, providing a significant platform for discussion, dialogue and debate. Their exhibition reflected a diversity of ideas and range of voices, their collaborations created a space for further reflection and differing perspectives. Throughout the project their confidence grew with many making short speeches at the opening of My Museum.

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The My Museum element provided understanding of the workings and development of a gallery space, providing a high level of engagement and organisation with a strong emphasis on contextual sources.

Notice of the annual general meeting

All members are invited to attend the 120th AGM of NSEAD held as part of our national conference in Durham. The AGM will be on Saturday 24 June 2017 at 1.30 pm, at Durham Sixth Form Centre. An AGM agenda and the Annual Report and audited accounts 2015–16 are available on the NSEAD website, or by request from the NSEAD office.

NSEAD Elections 2017

God Gaat, who served as President of the Society during 2015–16, currently serves as Immediate Past President on the Council, the Finance and General Purposes Committee and NSEAD Forum, ending his tenure on 31 December 2017. Consequently, nominations are sought for a member of the Society to serve as President Elect during 2018, President during 2019–2020 and Immediate Past President until 31 December 2021.

Individuals nominated to serve as President of the Society normally will be serving members of Council, or will have completed a term as a member of Council.

The role of the President is to chair the Council, the Finance and General Purposes Committee and NSEAD Forum. The President may also represent the Society alongside or in lieu of the General Secretary. The President is supported by two Vice Presidents and the Honorary Treasurer.

The President Elect is nominated and elected by members of the Society by postal ballot. For an informal discussion about the role of President, please email lesleybutterworth@nsead.org. The deadline for receipt of nominations is Friday 8 September 2017. Nomination forms are available from lesleybutterworth@nsead.org.

NSEAD Council

A reminder that we have vacancies for members wishing to serve on Council. The deadline for receipt of nominations is Friday 8 September 2017. Nomination forms are available from lesleybutterworth@nsead.org.
NSEAD National Conference 2017

Establishing excellence through learning and teaching in art, craft and design education

Friday 23 Saturday 24 June 2017
Durham Sixth Form Centre

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The conference will define and celebrate excellence in our subject across all phases and will be of relevance to teachers and educators of art, craft and design working in primary, secondary and further education, museum and gallery educators and initial teacher trainers and trainees.

Artist and NSEAD patron Cornelia Parker OBE RA, and president of NSEAD, Dr Peter Gregory, principal lecturer, Christ Church Canterbury University will be giving keynote presentations.

Visit: nsead.org/cpd/conferences.aspx

Notice of the Annual General Meeting

Members are invited to attend the 129th AGM of NSEAD held as part of our national conference in Durham

An AGM agenda and the Annual Report 2015–16 is available at www.nsead.org

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