

Collaborative imaginative drawings, a photo-story

Nigel Meager on regaining fluency in drawing and banishing the 'I can't draw' syndrome. Here's how...

It is commonly thought that art offers individual children highly personalised opportunities to come to express their inner world and its complex connections with the objective world. For example, drawing in school can be thought of as an activity where individuals communicate, record perceptions, invent and plan from a personal perspective. In primary school drawing this might mean each child has a piece of paper, workbook or sketchbook, and goes on to produce an outcome which is a personal response to their sensations, perceptions and ideas.

In contrast, the collaborative drawing workshop for 9- and 10-year-olds, described by the photo-story on the following page, was part of a research project which challenged these assumptions about intrinsically personal expression and communication through the production of discreet art objects by individuals – assumptions which are deeply embedded in a fine art tradition of art and art education.

Having said that, children drawing together or alongside adults are established strategies in early years teaching. Research about literacy in the early years shows how young children are at ease making complex meanings in a cross-modal way as they play, talk and draw in the community of the classroom. Adults may look on with sadness as such fluent drawing – so naturally part of thinking and communicating – is replaced with hesitancy and even fear as children progress through school. Our collaborative drawing project sought to unlock that fluency for older children. Something they once had but had lost.

For this project I worked with Whitchurch Primary School in Cardiff. This is a large, new

primary school amalgamated from two older schools in September 2012. The head teacher, Ann Griffin, wanted a project which would support the integration of 9- and 10-year-olds from different schools. Part of my brief from the school was to show how shared drawing could catalyse a high level of collaboration, communication and develop thinking skills. To help with these objectives, children were made fully part of the research project as knowing participants. The teaching also introduced meta-learning concepts about creativity. For example, it is valuable not to worry about mistakes, to take risks, to collaborate with others, share ideas and enjoy inventiveness. They relished the respect implied by the overt interest in their opinions about what they were doing and so, as well as making the drawings, they were very thoughtful about how they were thinking and acting as they drew.

In contrast, representational drawing skills were downplayed to the maximum, to the extent that children were encouraged to think that stick people were fine if that meant they could share, show and build ideas. The hope was that the 'I can't draw' syndrome would be banished as children accepted drawing as a way of creating and expressing ideas together, rather than an activity which required a special individual skill to enjoy. The panels were made from medium density fibre board primed with white emulsion paint. The drawn shapes and lines were made with permanent marker pens and then overlain with water based drawing inks applied with brushes. It didn't matter if the ink went over lines; sometimes that effect was very pleasing. Apart from introducing the theme, 'imaginary rides', children accepted the challenge of creating all the content themselves. There was the absolute minimum of adult intervention. The photo-story on the following double-page spread shows what happened. One of the finished panels is illustrated here.

Continued on pages 16-18



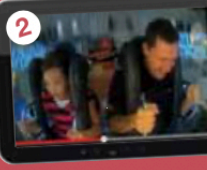
Collaborative imaginative drawings, a photo-story continued

It's the ideas which count. Don't worry too much about making 'good' drawings – stick people and animals, words and labels are all fine.



The workshop theme is 'rides'.

1



"Have you experienced a ride? What could imaginary rides be like? Think about the imaginary setting and what happens on the ride."

2




"Don't forget this is a research project and you are participating in the research."

3




Children talk about imaginary rides in groups. "What could we do? What are your ideas?"

4



After talking, children first work as individuals. They are invited to create ideas for imaginary rides in visual notebooks.

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Now their mak collc draw

This is one the 2.5 sq metre improvisations.

Bay Art Gallery is an artists' run exhibition space supported by Arts Council Wales.



This is intense work and children needed to take a break.

22



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Next, all sixteen children created a huge spontaneous collaborative drawing incorporating many of their visual ideas from session one.

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First children were asked to explore how to make lines on their own and then they collaborated with those around them.

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The second workshop session started with two large, collaborative drawing improvisations – the paper was 2.5m square.

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This mixed class of 16 split into four groups of four. Children self selected their groups. They were asked to explore how to go about creating a long rectangular panel for permanent display in the school.



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Some children immediately thought about colour and explored techniques for applying ink to their panel.

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Adults took an interest but did not offer advice or suggestions unless asked.

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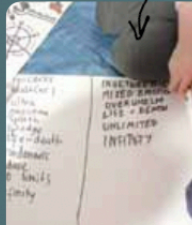
Children were always reminded that this is a research project as well as a drawing workshop.

26



There was a lot of thinking as well as talking.

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The panel as it was on the floor of the workshop ready to be taken back to school. A detail from this panel with explanatory text follows.

43



A detail from the bottom of the same panel.

42



Here is a detail from one of the panels at the end of session 3.

41



Coming towards the end of session 3. These panels will be finished back in school.

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Some to he

Children start to add colour using inks. There is a reminder that this is also a research project in the background.



Now children share their ideas before making their first collaborative drawings.

1



It's great fun creating the imaginary ride together. The marker pens are easy to use and make clear bold lines.

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Children take their own photographs, if they want.



The collaborative imaginative drawing is progressing.

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Children slightly wet the area where they want to add colour before applying ink so that it spreads easily across the surface. This is a simple technique to learn.

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One child bought to school a pack of information about real rides.

16



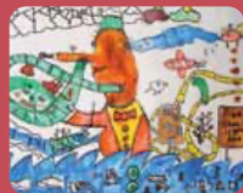
Others thought in conceptual as well as visual terms.

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Sixteen children went on to the second stage of the project at a contemporary art gallery. They were invited to do their own visual research at home. Some created new ideas for rides.



The collaborative drawings reached this stage by the end of the first session.

13



Some groups used writing to help with ideas.



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Other children were very methodical – in this case deciding on specific colours for specific elements of their ride.

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At the end of session 2 each group had a really good plan for what to do on their final panels.

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This is another example from the end of session 2.

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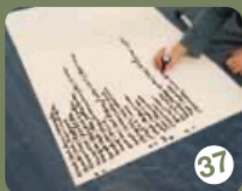
At the start of session 3, the following day, children had a chance to look at all the work from sessions 1 and 2. This had been informally displayed on the gallery walls.



38

In contrast, this group had an informal experiment sheet to try out colours and techniques.

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Others decided to write very detailed parts of the process as guidelines. This is a set of instructions about where and how to use colour.



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Some children bought in their own cameras to record what happened.



The panels were made from MDF and were made a particular size for permanent display in school.

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Each group organised themselves in the gallery space, ready to work on the panels.

The panels are progressing well.