

# 'Mysteries of the Flesh' – A project on the body in a catholic School

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Case study: **#35**

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**In my second year of teaching, I was settling into a 'comfort zone' after my NQT year. Feeling wary of this, I enrolled on an MA at the Institute of Education. There I found new challenges which taught me never to underestimate my students and to take a fresh look at my own educational values.**

As an inexperienced teacher I wanted to ground my skills-based teaching, but also to explore relevant contemporary issues. My school is an East London Catholic comprehensive school, with a mixed social intake. I was interested in students' responses to our culture of liberal and sexually-saturated visual media, so I devised a project called 'The Body'. These mixed-ability year 11 students showed creative potential in year 10, but often ended up with clumsy unfinished outcomes. I had to proceed with caution to ensure their GCSE achievement and satisfy their creativity.

We started with careful study of Picasso's 'Demoiselles D'Avignon' (1907) and Jenny Savilles 'Plan' (1997). Picasso's intention to reveal ugliness and performance provided an historical context for 'shocking' art. Through discussion my own understanding deepened and I gained trust in the students' ideas. Jenny Saville's 'Plan' is an engaging contemporary source for students. 'Plan' introduces identity construction and body issues ranging from a straightforward discussion on 'size' to the advanced ideas of viewer positioning, subversion and various feminist concepts. These ideas were cross-referenced with pieces like 'The Rokeby Venus' and gender biased magazines. Discussions on pornography, weight loss and self-esteem ensued for many lessons! The students surprised me with their passion and wealth of opinion on these matters. It seemed that they rarely discussed body issues openly outside the limited contexts of health, science or religious education. Saville's use of colour and texture also facilitated my traditional approach to teaching painting skills. Other related tasks included life drawing, photography, portraiture and collage.

Photography flourished as many produced their own visions of imperfection through posing and distortion. Depending on ability, some students studied further artists such as Orlan and Cindy Sherman. Barbara Kruger was another artist whom the students found engaging and accessible. Her graphic style inspired some 'pasted' responses but nonetheless from the students own passions and beliefs. Kruger's work allowed the introduction of politics and consumerism into the ideas base. Political ideas were popular with the boys who found it difficult to be subjective about self-esteem and the body. On evaluation I realised that this was a shortcoming in my planning. This taught me to be wary of imposing ideas and preferences and to take more care in planning for all interests and abilities. The boys were however, successfully engaged in skills-based learning. The students' progression became evident as many considered choosing A level with a growing understanding of the academic scope of art. In this respect the project was a success because there was a balance of both skills and concepts.

Illustrated are some outcomes ranging from abstraction and appropriation of media sources to a send-up of political rhetoric. For my MA I analysed their responses based on gender, ability, religion etc. This analysis taught me how much is at stake when we as teachers introduce ideas to students. Students' personal meaning-making is easily overlooked as we assess it with GCSE criteria, which (rightly) allow no place for subjectivity or taste. Deeper analysis was inspiring and gave me the confidence to trust in my students and not to impose my ideas upon them, (which I had tried to avoid but inevitably failed at times!). Through The Body project, most students found a form of expression that was deeply personal and important to them.

The influence of the mass media and popular culture was reflected in almost all the students' work but their understanding of its reproduction varied. I did not intend The Body to be contentious or controversial, yet the students' outcomes revealed themes of horror, power and sexuality – issues that were more contentious than I first realised. I learned that the media pervades their lives with its 'mass resources, seductive imagery and sensuous pleasures' (Dalton, *The Gendering of Art Education*, 2001:117). Their art lessons however, were not in competition with the mass media. Through making meaning in their own art and recognising the tools of the media, they gained a more critical understanding of visual culture. Their use of media based research sources was less surprising than their advanced ability to question and parody these sources.

Recent research in art education indicates that modernism is over-used in schools. Theorists suggest that contemporary art can be more engaging and relevant to students. This research was evident in my MA studies and The Body project was my opportunity to test this. In terms of student engagement I wholeheartedly agree that contemporary art is a rich and exciting source for students and that students are very well-equipped to understand art that is made in our media saturated culture. As a teacher who also needs to fulfil examination criteria and teach traditional skills, I recommend combining the study of contemporary art with modernist and older historical sources. Finally, I encourage any teacher who is slipping into a 'comfort zone', to challenge your prejudices and insecurities, try something new and trust that the students will surprise and inspire you with their responses.

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