

School Profile: A Comprehensive mixed 13-19 Community College of 1300 pupils, situated in a market town in the South West of England.

What did the school want to achieve?

The school was commissioning a new Post-16 building to facilitate the delivery of business and ICT courses. It is a condition of our local authority planning permission that publicly funded buildings should have 1% of their budget spent on art. Within the budget we wanted a real 'wow' factor building. Ambitious artworks would set the tone of the building and encourage students to take pride in their environment.

We were keen to work with local NVB Architects to incorporate artworks into the fabric of the building. The architects were very interested in working with the school students during the development their proposals and were completely open to suggestions for the nature and location of the artworks.

How was the learning organised to achieve these aims?

We identified a group of final year double award Applied Art A level students. An initial meeting was set up with the architects who were part of NVB Associates and whose practice was located in the town. Previous examples of students design work were discussed to give an idea of the skills and level of our students work.

We agreed to run the project over a six-week period and set up a weekly meeting at the architects' office during which the students would present their work in progress. This would ensure we came up with exciting but realistic proposals and maintained a dialogue with our client (NVB) throughout the project. The architects were really supportive and very excited to be involved in the development of the artworks and give advice about materials and suppliers for the final realisation of the works.

Students worked during their double award lessons to develop designs and each week received a verbal critique from their client each Friday afternoon to inform their work the following week. This was a fantastic motivator!

As well as lead architects, a landscape architect was also involved.

The seven students quickly started to generate ideas which ranged from binary codes to be sandblasted onto glass, a range of decorative bricks, to life size figures on a corridor wall that contained motion sensors to light up as students walk past. We looked at a wide range of public artworks and students used techniques ranging from casting and moulding, to laser cutting acrylic and cardboard. As an art department we made closer links with our Technology department as some students made connections with materials and processes used in their A level product design course, previously unknown to the art staff!

Photoshop skills and digital work including images of the proposed designs formed the central working method. We worked with the architects' documents to access their drawings and plans, learning a lot about how these develop and change as the project went on.

After four weeks of initial research the students had three exam days spread over two weeks. Work was intense and by now the focus was on how the designs would be realised, and the practicalities of each proposal. The students were also increasingly aware of the high standard of presentation needed to 'sell' their idea not only to the architects, but to justify the budget to the Principal, staff, public and county planning department. Proposals were very well received and we are now taking them forward to the next stage-putting the building out to tender.

As lead teacher for the project I will continue to work with the site team as the building comes together to oversee the lengthy final stage of fabricating and installing each artwork. Students have happily agreed to expect further consultation by e-mail as the works progress, despite the fact they will have completed their A Levels and left school before the project is completed.

How well did the school achieve its aims?

The pace of the project and the quality of the students' designs was phenomenal. The opportunity to work with professional architects was a fantastic learning experience for both students and staff. The architects were amazingly enthusiastic, making excellent appraisals of the students' designs and providing clear targets for development.

The experience of sitting in the board room each Friday afternoon, despite the fantastic encouragement, support and hospitality from NVB couldn't help but feel like something between Dragons Den and The Apprentice! Being out of the classroom and put on the spot in front of the professionals was a great motivator for a couple of the more laid-back learners.

The Applied A level course has given us many exciting opportunities over the past four years and this is an excellent example of how vocational education can work at the highest level. The individual direction developed by each of the students made for an excellent exam project. The assessment objectives for the vocational A level are such that they were met by the work that the students produced encouraging through a very thorough interpretation of the brief.

Relying on ourselves and the students/ NVB and devising proposals that could be commercially produced felt like a bit of a risk. But with the advances in digital technology and ability to have jpegs printed on flooring, laminated plastics for toilet cubicles, transferred onto glass is a real possibility for any art department that has a mind to think big.

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