

# Enquiry-led learning – answering big questions through art

Naomi Hart

Case study: **#36**

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**Enquiry-based learning is largely about designing the curriculum around problems or challenges that allow students to progress through experimentation and evaluation, guided by teacher feedback.**

A main goal of this approach is to create relevance and authenticity – students are presented with a problem that provides a context for their learning. The students are then encouraged to develop their own process to find a solution, and are thus able to work more independently. As Northumberland makes the transition from a three to two tiered system Cramlington Community High School has become Cramlington Learning Village. With our new Year 7 and 8 students joining us in September 2008, we had an ideal opportunity to build our Key Stage 3 curriculum around the new guidelines, taking enquiry-based learning as a coherent whole-school approach.

It was suggested that the students would complete one unit each term and that each unit of work should be based around and titled with one key question. Each unit itself therefore became a larger enquiry, comprising of a number of smaller more focussed enquiries within. To begin with, a small team of teachers from our department sat down together to thrash out some 'key questions' in art. Coming up with these questions was an interesting process for artists and teachers with varied experiences and expertise in a variety of disciplines. We initially thought of abstract questions, and then tried thinking through our priorities in terms of content in order to categorise these and pull them together under various larger, over-arching questions.

Some questions seemed to emerge organically such as why people draw. This would allow us to explore drawing as both ancient art form and contemporary practice, a means of expression and a recording tool, and the building block of many different art practices. Others initially felt questions such as, 'What is art?' were ambitious and potentially over-whelming. However, as we considered the learning journey we intended for the pupils, we found that each huge question gradually became both crucial and more manageable.

As a department used to Year 9 upwards, we often feel that by Year 10 the students have become somewhat narrow-minded in their understanding of art and what 'successful' or 'quality' artwork is, and are also increasingly self-conscious of their own weaknesses or perceived failings. We hope to use Years 7 and 8 to broaden their perceptions and develop students who have both the thinking skills and open-minds to question art and see it as the vast arena for creativity that it is, rather than a one-horse race where students show up to lessons having already decided if they are a 'can' or a 'can't'.

When Year 7 and 8 entered their art classroom for the first time they were to be greeted with enquiry-based units of work posing the questions 'Why do people draw?' and 'What is Art?' respectively. Other units asked if art can communicate and what could be used to make art.

We carefully considered our intentions with regards to these questions and realised we weren't necessarily hoping for the students to find answers, but rather to feel confident in navigating the issues that would arise from them. For example, the students would not establish a fixed notion of what art is and what it is not, but would be able to engage in thoughtful discussion about how we make judgements on the value of artworks.

We were also very concerned that these larger enquiries would present the opportunity to cover a range of different experiences from researching, reviewing and presenting to the practical skills that would be vital as they potentially progress to Key Stage 4. We were very aware that we wanted to create opportunities for the students to enquire into concepts within art and open them up to contemporary art and thinking, but that we were not prepared to do this at the expense of skills.

Reflecting on the past year we feel as a department that the majority of enquiries have worked extremely well and provided new, engaging learning experiences for the students. We also recognise that others may need to be reviewed, re-considered and differentiated further. Some longer enquiries that spanned a few lessons proved difficult with weaker students or those with behavioural issues, while other students relished the independence. On other occasions, gifted students found being outside of their comfort zone difficult, while the more challenging students enjoyed and showed real success with more open or risk-taking tasks. The crucial issue now is that we have the opportunity to reflect upon all aspects of the course, share good experiences and practices from this first year and refine the planning for next year.

**Naomi Hart** is teacher of art with responsibility for photography at Cramlington Learning Village, Cramlington, Northumberland  
[nhart@cramlingtonlv.co.uk](mailto:nhart@cramlingtonlv.co.uk)

