

When the eyes meet the ears and hands

Janice McLaren, projects organiser at The Photographers' Gallery, writes about how visual artist Helen Marshall introduced different media and entry points in the Digging up a Story project at Lauriston Primary School, Hackney

Introduction

Preferred learning styles are often broken into three categories (visual, auditory and kinaesthetic) and we might assume that most visual artists would employ the first of these categories as their preferred method of both learning and teaching. We might also believe that those young people who would benefit most from working alongside a visual artist would be children whose preferred learning style leaned toward the visual. This wasn't entirely the case, however, during the Digging up a Story project at Lauriston Primary School.

The artist and her role

Digging up a Story took place over 12 sessions with a class of year 6 pupils. Three external professionals; a storyteller, an archaeologist and a visual artist; worked alongside two of the school's teachers to lead the pupils in a journey of discovery and imagination in relation to an archaeological dig on the school grounds. A number of activities were introduced (storytelling, scanning and, later, video) in order to offer pupils different ways in to thinking about what was being unearthed just outside their classroom window. Victorian pottery shards, toothbrush handles, one hundred year old nails and even the outer ring of a pocket watch became the inspiration for stories and artwork.

Helen Marshall is a visual artist who mainly uses photography and film, and has worked with The Photographers' Gallery on a number of occasions. Helen was asked to join the Digging up a Story project because of her experience in collaborative projects, and on the basis of work she had produced, in collaboration with a number of older individuals, in which a scanner was used

to record a series of small, cherished objects. In this project each scan was used to produce poster-sized photographs – transforming a tiny keepsake into something of comparably colossal proportions. It was felt that transforming an object in this way might serve as a good base for the project's concurrent storytelling sessions, as well as providing a 'visual glue' that could pull the results of the project together for a final presentation. It would also serve as a visual entry point for learning.

Helen's preferred learning styles approach

Helen has developed projects in a variety of contexts including schools, colleges, prisons and hospitals. As she has said, 'In my practice as an artist in residence, I try to consider as many points of entry to a project as possible – to be ambitious yet make it accessible. I have rarely thought about this within a pedagogical framework beyond the research and planning time that is given to that particular project.'

Despite often introducing multiple points of entry into previous collaborative work, Helen had never before linked them to the preferred learning styles approach. It wasn't until she began to notice posters up around the school, identifying and promoting the preferred learning styles system, that she began to understand why and how the Digging up a Story project had been 'masterminded'.

Helen saw her role in the project as complementing the skills and resources the teachers and other professionals were able to offer. She planned to introduce the digital technology skills of scanning and the use of

Photoshop software as a way of linking and transforming objects found during the school dig with storytelling sessions.

Introducing film to the mix

One medium that was introduced part of the way into the project, and initially as a device for recording evidence, was film. Some of the pupils seemed to be easily distracted and were having difficulties settling into the object scanning sessions. Helen noticed this and commented, 'further into the project, I became aware that some of the pupils had not become as engaged with the visual process as they were with the other activities that involved more noise, physical displacement and movement around the project environment.'

When film was introduced these pupils quickly became interested and engaged in documenting the stories they had created as part of the project. They captured themselves with some quite startling results, drawing on the medium's strength for creating an atmosphere, through cropping and lighting, to record their dark and inventive tales of the underworld.

On reflection, the use of film seemed to be tapping into a kinaesthetic mode of learning. Teachers remarked upon how these pupils' behaviour dramatically changed when they began to use the camera.

Helen is quick to stress that the timing for introducing film to the project was crucial. 'The camera was brought in following the development of other aspects of the project and, because of its popular uptake, it may have dominated or precluded the benefits of the project if it had been introduced earlier.'

Film was added to the project as a route into learning and Helen felt it was equally important that the pupils had a choice about whether film should feature in the final presentation of their work. As she says, 'It was interesting to note that several of the pupils who might have been most readily categorised as 'disaffected' within the classroom, spontaneously led and took charge of the screening during the final presentation and astounded some of those around who knew them.'

This raises the question about how the presentation of work, and work in progress, can also link into children's preferred learning

styles, and into learning itself. The work in progress was often shared during the weeks leading up to the final presentation and this was something that the pupils came to expect and look forward to. Pupils were involved in, and witnessed each other, performing, listening and looking as the project progressed. This mirrored a professional artist's own approach to working and presenting their work. Helen remarks that within art 'to learn, is to make, is to celebrate.'

Looking back, thinking ahead

Helen's own approach to working with others has been altered through thinking about the way the pupils at Lauriston took up different routes to learning. Helen identified her own preferred learning style to veer toward the visual and auditory, which has given her cause for concern. 'Could it be, then, that I facilitate others' learning in the styles through which I also learn best? I have not considered this before. It puts a new perspective on how I might approach facilitating learning in the future. It also makes me increasingly mindful of the tools and media I choose to employ within a creative project.'

Helen's advice to others thinking about using the preferred learning styles approach in a creative project is to ensure that all partners enter into formal discussions about the different entry points to learning that pupils will be offered. She also stressed that those entry points need to inspire the interest of the groups but that the tools shouldn't eclipse the learning.

An awareness of what each of the other professionals can offer, including those particular and sometimes hidden skills and experiences of teachers, will help to ensure that if a pupil isn't engaging in a project one way there are options to learn via other equally valid routes.

Helen concludes her own experience: 'Knowledge of preferred learning styles has made me more conscious of the common formulas or methods I have used within my approach as an artist over the years, in participatory and educational contexts. It has broadened my understanding of how these methods could be underpinned by what I understand of the preferred learning styles framework, and how it might open up a new area of enquiry in terms of the whole of my practice and my pursuits as an artist.'