

Islington Arts and Media School

Arts and media methodology in practice

Summary

Since 2003 Islington Arts and Media School has been on a mission to create a dynamic learning environment for all students. The school has committed to teaching creatively across the whole curriculum and during this period has worked with Active-Studio, the Almeida Theatre and Guildhall School of Music and Drama to deliver a range of curriculum topics.

School context

Islington Arts and Media School (IAMS) is an oversubscribed mixed comprehensive school of 865 students. There are significantly more boys than girls on the school roll (533 to 332). 75% of pupils are from minority ethnic groups. Ofsted (2004) reports that approximately 10% are in the early stages of acquiring English. About 50% of students are eligible for free school meals and 30% are identified as having special educational needs. The school serves a mobile community and annual turnover of pupils is as high as 10%. Ofsted sees it as an effective and rapidly improving school that provides a good quality of education. Ofsted also said "The Headteacher, who is very well supported by the governors and the senior leadership group, provides outstanding leadership that is raising the aspirations and expectations of staff and students."

The project

The school was awarded specialist arts and media status in 2004. Students now do art, drama, music, dance and media throughout key stage 3, and 60% of them do two of those subjects at key stage 4. The school is improving and its GCSE results over a short period have increased from 4% to 47%. However, more needed to be done to hit the 50% target the school has set itself. One of the steps of their planned journey is to move to arts-based learning. The key objective of this move is to find ways to deliver more of the curriculum through the use of arts and media – thus 'making creativity everyone's responsibility'. Working with creative practitioners is seen as an essential component of demonstrating how arts methodology assists learning.

The cross-curricular work started in 2003. It is a programme, comprising a number of projects led by a creative practitioners who have been commissioned to design, support and deliver agreed curriculum topics.

Projects have included:

Science through drama in partnership with the Almeida Theatre

The science and drama collaboration resulted in the production of a set of theatrical pieces "Origin of the Species – Darwin." In this year 11 science students were able to explore the impact of Charles Darwin's writings on evolution by scripting and producing dramatic representations.

Geography, science and maths through music in partnership with Guildhall School of Music and Drama (GSMD)

With GSMD students created a soundtrack to accompany a video on earthquakes and volcanoes. They experimented with sounds in work around atoms and particles. The work on probability in maths was originally conceived as music and dance interpretation – Chance Dance – but the loss of the dance tutor meant the work focused on musical interpretations reflective of the random results of the throw of the dice.

Modern foreign languages through multi-media in partnership with Active Studio

In French and Spanish, year 7 pupils learnt how to animate learning through multi-media presentations using the internet, PowerPoint, video clips and a range of electronic publishing techniques.

Head of arts and media faculty and Creative Partnerships co-ordinator Mary Huane, developed this wide-ranging programme around the following Creative Partnerships outcomes:

- for the young people – it aimed to impact on their ability to make connections and see relationships; ability to learn across contexts; the ability to explore and generate new ideas, to consult, build on the ideas of others and work in teams;
- for the teachers – it was to develop their confidence to innovate, develop creative teaching skills and to increase their sense of purpose and confidence;
- for the school – the work was seen as a means of contributing to a distinctive learning ethos, impacting on whole school change and the way the curriculum is delivered.

Reflections

For headteacher Richard Ewen, the work on cross-curricular practice is fundamental to embedding creativity across the school. This programme was seen as having given pupils enjoyment, achievement, confidence and experience of learning in different ways. It's linked to work undertaken by the whole school on learning styles. "For us, as professionals, we have explored learning styles. This has enabled my teachers to develop pedagogy in ways they would not have anticipated."

Deputy headteacher Judy Gemmell, reinforced the impact of work that challenged traditional departmental compartmentalisation and reflected on the benefits of "making people work at their practice, pedagogy and methodology."

Year 7 students were delighted with the opportunity to bring their own skills in IT to the French languages work with Jago Brown from Active-Studio and were articulate about the multi-media skills and French vocabulary they acquired. They talked confidently about Adobe Imaging and animation and how they created their pieces from scratch. They were also aware and very sympathetic that the behaviour of some of their peers was a hindrance to the project and wished it had been otherwise: "we enjoyed the way we had to do it. Jago doesn't get angry he is very patient – he gives us a chance to learn and always comes when you need help".

Inevitably, bringing so many creative partners in to the school brings management challenges. For Mary, planning and effective communication to staff produced a lot of paperwork and clashing deadlines. It was her personal passion and commitment, the senior management support and student enthusiasm that kept her positive and working towards the end goals.

This sense of coping with a large number of pupils and teachers is reflected in a few negative responses from the creative partners. The school had a number of new teachers and supply staff who were not always well informed of the process when taking or covering classes. The creative partners also felt a weight of scepticism from a few other teachers not yet committed to this way of working. The end result, they felt, was that students' creativity had been short changed by lack of follow-up work or teacher involvement in the sessions. However, those teachers who worked with the creative partners were astonished and praised the learning that took place. Some even went as far as rearranging the timetable to allow for work to be done in double periods instead of 40 minutes, so that the maximum benefits of working with the artists were achieved.

The programme produced some excellent creative outcomes. "We wrote two storming plays," noted Rebecca Manson Jones from the Almeida Theatre. The work had clearly brought a potentially obscure piece of science history to life for the young people, provoking "amazingly mature" discussions on ethics, morality and religion.

The work on probability had given children working on a maths topic the chance to explore musical concepts including body percussion, rhythm, vocalisation to aleatoric composition. Nor was the learning all one way – the GSMD tutors were able to learn about hip hop and street music and how to use their skills to enable learning in other contexts.

For the headteacher the work produced a "buzz" in the school. He saw young teachers taking risks. "Teachers used to think that creativity was not their responsibility. Now we all own this responsibility." The school now has ambitions to have each of its five faculties tied in with a creative partner. The work of the programme, alongside the associated work on learning styles, will be incorporated into a new and innovative key stage 3 system being offered in 2005.

Whilst it is clear that the senior staff in the school were fully involved in the work, understood and championed it, it is also clear that not all staff were onboard. Each project worked best when there was always a committed subject specialist in the classroom participating with the creative practitioner in the learning and achievement of the pupils.

IAMS is a school on a journey – raising pupil attainment through the arts and media underpins the school's approach and great progress is being made. The work on Preferred Learning Styles and Creativity led by Creative Partnerships London East is advanced and is currently being translated into a number of first languages to involve parents more with their children's learning. The multi-media cross-curricular programme brought together a number of projects that touched on a significant number of students and influenced further planning.

In its 2004 assessment, Ofsted inspectors were clear on the impact the school's commitment is having: "A major part of the school's innovative approach to the curriculum is taught through its involvement as a pilot school in Creative Partnerships. This exciting partnership is enabling pupils to work closely with a wide range of recognised artists and performers. It enriches the arts curriculum and is progressively influencing all subjects in the school. The creativity based approach to learning helps teachers to extend their teaching strategies and understanding of how pupils learn. Early evidence indicates that this partnership is making a very positive contribution to the

whole school ethos. For many students, whose interest is stimulated by their involvement in the wide range of activities provided, the effect of this approach to learning is to raise their self-esteem and aspirations.”

Even in a well-structured programme with management backing, good forward planning and careful communications, there is still more to be done. In particular it is finding creative ways of bringing the inexperienced, the risk averse or cynical teachers with you.

For the main part the objectives of the programme were met. Important partnerships were cemented, teaching skills were enhanced and students across the year group were given opportunities to undertake exciting and innovative learning experiences.