



Inspired responses case study

The Brindley Arts Centre in Runcorn opened in the summer of 2004. As the visual arts development officer for the venue and the borough of Halton, part of my remit was to develop an engaging programme of exhibitions for the gallery. Knowing that I would need to represent our schools within the space, but not wanting to simply showcase GCSE or A level work, I decided to build on my experience of artists working directly with communities.

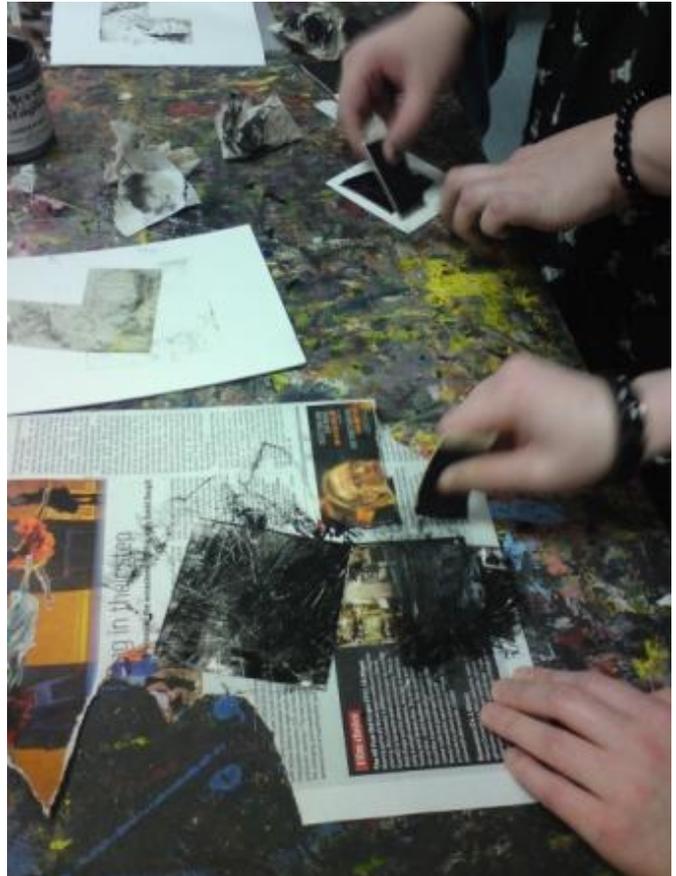
Halton is a small unitary authority in the north west of England. Formed in 1974, and formerly part of Cheshire, it is an area of economic and social deprivation, with high unemployment.

At the planning stage I sat down for some discussions with the head of art at Wade Deacon High School in Widnes. We had worked together previously and I wanted his opinion on how best to integrate the idea of an artist in residence with the format of a secondary school timetable. Together we devised what is now the Inspired Responses programme and in its seventh successful year.

Through my work in the borough since late 2000, I was in contact with a number of early and mid career artists who had excellent education experience. However many were bored with the thematic nature of much of the work they were offered, which often had little to do with their own practice.

My two main problems were – how to engage schools to work with artists within the restrictions of the secondary school timetable, and how to make the artists' residency cost effective for schools while providing satisfying employment for artists. Another issue was wanting to include work by the borough's three special schools, catering for children with a variety of needs and a wide range of disabilities from behavioural difficulties to complex learning and physical needs.

The first issue was resolved by working with my initial partner head of art, and planning out the best time of year, number of sessions and format in which to work. We decided to launch the scheme in autumn 2005 inviting schools to choose an artist by art form



In the early years, I also attended many of the final sessions, asking the children and teachers how they wanted their work to be displayed (on walls, plinths, hanging from the ceiling or on the floor), and suggesting any modifications they might need to make. This has become less necessary with regularly participating schools, as staff become more familiar with exhibiting work in the gallery space, and willing to communicate their ideas.

The main outcome of this project is that the majority of high schools and special schools in Halton now regularly participate in the programme, and so have benefited from the input of an artist in residence, without a huge financial commitment, with minimal organisational or administration requirements, and have embraced art forms they would not have otherwise attempted.

By showing the work of the artists alongside that of the students, we are removing the boundaries between 'education work' and exhibitions by professional artists. In many cases artists have made new work to show alongside that of the students. As one artist commented "*...the inspiration that I draw as an artist from working with others, (which) influences the work I create - I'm always happy to produce new work in response to the work with the school, which moves my practice on.*"

Rather than creating an 'education exhibition' I curate the exhibition with a view to making a professional presentation with statements, labels, postcards and a private view. Evaluations and ongoing discussions with artists and teachers feed back into the programme's development each year.

Some schools are still not engaging – one not at all, another only once. Unfortunately, due to an increasingly heavy workload, I have not found the time to address this directly with the schools concerned, but it is something I need to do as it may reflect something that is lacking in our current offer.

While giving the choice to schools over which artists to work with, this does not guarantee employment for all artists, although they want to work on the scheme. It's important to make this clear from the beginning of each project, and I always endeavour to maintain good communications with all the artists I work with. On occasion when a relationship between artists and a school has resulted in some disappointment, this has been because a misunderstanding between artist and teacher over expectations and ability of the students has occurred. To avoid this, again, communication is key and one of my most important responsibilities.

In 2012 I am hoping to engage the 2 main youth centres in Halton in the project, or a similar model, giving young people who may be excluded from school or less engaged with art to participate in the programme.

Further information: Inspired Responses was devised by and is run at the Brindley by Louise Hesketh, Visual Arts Development Officer, email: louise.hesketh@halton.gov.uk telephone 0151 907 8560.