



Teaching Through Contemporary Art

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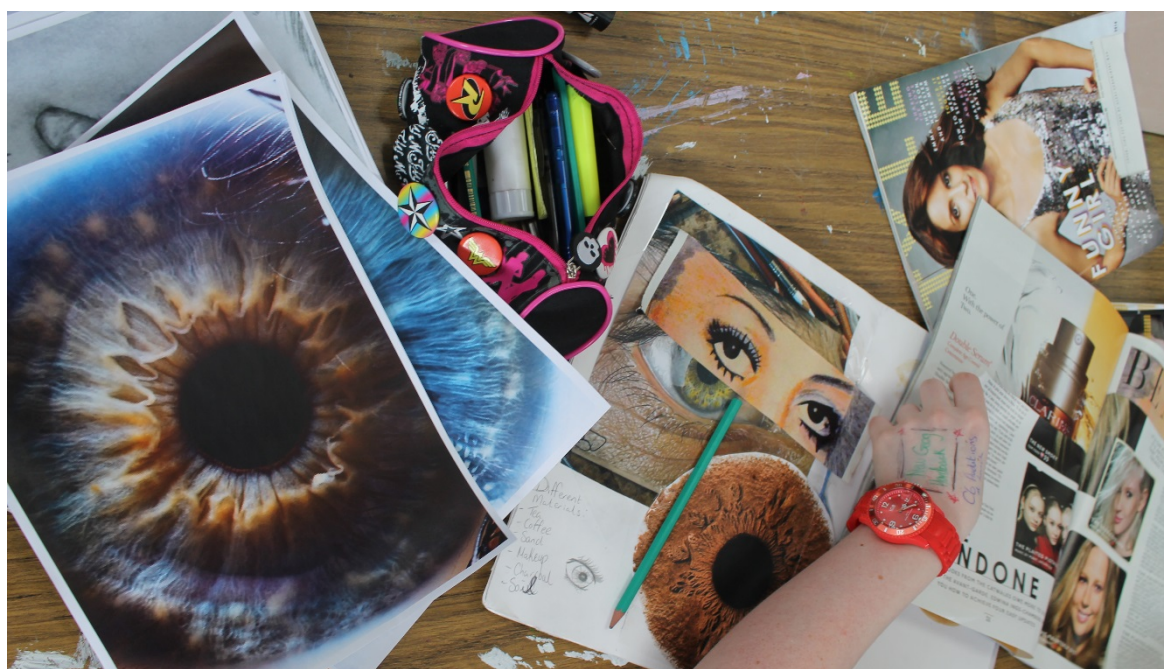
Post-primary art teacher

This essay outlines a study which explored post-primary student responses to a contemporary art exhibit in a gallery setting. In addition it examines the role of previous artistic experience and making art in the classroom in response to the art gallery visits. The original research set out to explore how I could facilitate my students' understanding of process and concept in art practice through engagement with contemporary art in a gallery setting. The outcomes show that when a community of practice formed, the boundaries between teacher and students blurred, students became motivated, self-directed and took ownership of their work. The role of the gallery as a learning environment and the role of the artist also had a positive impact on the project's findings. To conclude I discuss the outcomes that this project has had on my teaching and on students' learning.

When I left college after my teaching diploma, I landed a full time art teaching position. I had twenty two hours teaching time and I was the only art teacher in the school, one of the lucky ones. During that time I developed a curriculum that worked, but I always wanted to challenge my teaching; discover new ways of teaching and learning. The areas of the curriculum that I focused my original Masters Research project on, were gallery learning and contemporary art. How could I use these areas to enhance my teaching? Like most art teachers I had always shown examples of contemporary art to my class but it was an aspect of the art curriculum that art teachers shy away from, myself included. For me it was the idea of teaching the unknown – video, text, installation art –how could I explain this? Through research I realised that I didn't need to explain what contemporary art was, but instead I could change the traditional teacher-student relationship and as the teacher I could work alongside the students, and explore as a learner. I wanted my students to develop a better understanding of what an artist is, what do they do all day? How do they come up with finished art works? I wanted them to explore and understand the idea of concept and process involved in contemporary art practice. The best way to get students to understand this was to get them to work as artists rather than art students in a self-directed manner. I decided to do this through active engagement with an artist and gallery.

Planning

A lot of planning was needed in order to carry out this project: time well spent. I had to select an appropriate group of students, a gallery, artists and theme as well as deciding how to implement the project, what teaching method to use. I selected my second year group, which consisted of 20 girls and 4 boys, of mixed ability. In terms of curriculum I thought second year would be perfect as I use first year to introduce the basic art elements and build on skills. I also thought that the self-directed aspect of this project would help motivate students to become more independent in third year. When it came to selecting a theme I selected *identity*. Through artist research and studying other contemporary art education projects, open ended themes that students can easily relate to worked best. I looked at a number of themes and selected identity, as it was easy to find appropriate contemporary art work that fitted that theme. Finally I needed a venue and artist who were willing to become involved in the project. I selected the Highlanes gallery as Director Aoife Ruane was very willing to get involved on the idea of introducing contemporary art into the classroom. The exhibition “Not Sorry” by Theresa Nanigian was running in the gallery until the end of May and Theresa was willing to discuss the exhibition and her art practice with my students. The exhibition fitted the theme and consisted of large photographs and text based art works.



Project Implementation

I took a simple approach to introducing the project to the group, I used a prezi slideshow to form the basis of a discussion on what contemporary art was and even what is art? I preferred to allow the students to come up with their own view points and opinions, drawing out the information rather than telling the students the answers. I was pleasantly surprised by their reaction to the project and to the art work that I was showing them. The interactive installation “The Event of a Thread” by Anne Hamilton was extremely popular and students seem to really understand the importance of the viewer’s participation in the art work. Students had positive views on contemporary art and I didn’t get any negative comments about the work shown. This might have been because I asked them to look at the work in a positive manner, no “sure anyone could do that” comments. More importantly students were okay with not understanding everything about the art works shown. To coincide with introducing contemporary art I also wanted the students to begin working independently as artists. I got the students to make their own a4 sketchbooks from a3 paper and string, I got them to then create their own cover design, based loosely on the theme of identity.

Gallery Visits

In order for the project to work, I decided on visiting the gallery twice, once to familiarise the students with the gallery space and art work and on the second visit to build on their opinions of the art works and to visit the artist to discuss her art practice. During the first gallery visit I decided to take a step back from the students and allow them free rein of the gallery, to explore for themselves. As a teacher this was one of the most difficult experiences in teaching to date. I didn't interact with the students within the gallery and instead handed out the hand-outs and sketchbooks and left the students to explore the exhibition. Most of the students were timid at first, wandering around the work unsure of what to do. They gradually eased into the space and began to work on their hand-out. All students worked in pairs or groups of more than two which I found interesting, needing someone for reassurance or backup. For the second half of this visit, I sat the students in a circle to discuss the exhibition. This was a great way for the students to reflect on what they were experiencing, a way for them to flesh out what the work was about and for them to discuss their views on the artwork.

There was only one week between the first and second gallery visit. During that time, I allowed the students to develop their sketchbook cover, begin brainstorming the theme and develop a concept for their project. Furthermore the students created questions to ask the artist, Theresa Nanigan, which explored the process and concepts involved in the art works' journey from idea to gallery. If there was one aspect of the project that played a key role in its success, I would have to say that it was the interaction with the artist in the gallery space. The students were so excited to meet a "real" artist. Theresa was kind and generous with her time. She spoke about her art practice and how her ideas develop through her artistic process, and she took time to talk to the students about their own ideas for their project.



Self-directed Learning

Back in the classroom the students reflected on the artist talk and, inspired from their visit, they began working on their own projects. I set out some guidance for the students to brainstorm, research and experiment. Most students at first found it difficult to know where to start or what to do, as all they had to go on was a theme: identity. But as the project progressed the students eased into the project. Some students worked in groups to begin with but as time progressed ideas differed and they went their separate ways. I held regular critiques of their progress and reminded them of the importance of documenting the artistic process rather than worrying about the end result. I kept my involvement to a minimum, working as a facilitator rather than a teacher directing the project. Around the mid-way point of the project, I brought in my own art and showed the students what I was working on as a practising artist. Following this discussion and to keep myself from getting involved in their projects, I began working on a drawing in the classroom. In turn we created an art studio environment, one which was based on a community of practice, working together on a similar theme but on separate works. The main point of this project was not to assess the art works that students created but to assess the journey that the students documented in their sketchbooks and to assess the way in which students worked in a new learning environment. Despite this each student created a finished art piece, which through discussion they wanted to exhibit. So the students turned the art room into a mini gallery for a few days, working together to curate their own mini exhibition.



Project Outcomes

The students who were involved in this project are currently in transition year and fifth year. The results that this group of students received in their junior certificate art were the best grades that the school has ever had in the art department. Along with the students I note that this project played a key role in the results received. Students remarked that they were confident in working independently and confident in their ideas, which in turn boosted their work rate.

Since introducing this project into my teaching practice there have been many positive developments within the classroom and with the Highlanes gallery. It was clear to see the impact that the project had academically on students. During third year the students seemed to clearly understand how to begin their project, working with a chosen theme and what to do for their support studies, which used to be the bane of junior certificate teaching. Out of the 24 students involved in this project 19 of them received an A for their junior certificate art project. I can honestly say that this project had a direct effect on their working attitude.

A great connection and relationship has also been built between our school, its students and the Highlanes Gallery. Since establishing a link with this new learning environment a number of class groups, both junior and senior cycle students, have been to visit not just exhibitions, but also to get a *behind-the-scenes* look at how to install an exhibition, and attend artist talks that were solely set up for secondary school students. As part of Culture Night 2015, students' research notebooks, photographs of the project and a drawing which I created in the classroom were exhibited in the Gallery as part of a small exhibition titled "How to: Teachers, Young People and Art". Recently, Aoife Ruane, the director of the Highlanes Gallery arranged for Ann Jones, curator of the collection of the Arts Council of England to talk to my transition year students about their art collection and gave them a guided tour of the exhibition "One Day Something Happens". This tour was given a day before the exhibition was opened to the general public, during the exhibition's final touches. Students experienced first-hand the busy atmosphere of a major painting exhibition install, they got to witness the handling of art works and how wall colour and lighting can affect an art work. Further projects are also in the pipeline for 2016.

As a teacher I can honestly look back at say that this project has changed the way I teach. What started as a simple research project developed into something much more than that. I have incorporated more self-directed learning into my classroom in a confident manner. All students use sketchbooks or visual diaries to record and document their 'art practice' alongside creating final work. Establishing a link with a local contemporary art gallery has had a colossal impact on my students' learning and their understanding of how art is created.





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