

Watch This Space 5 Case Study

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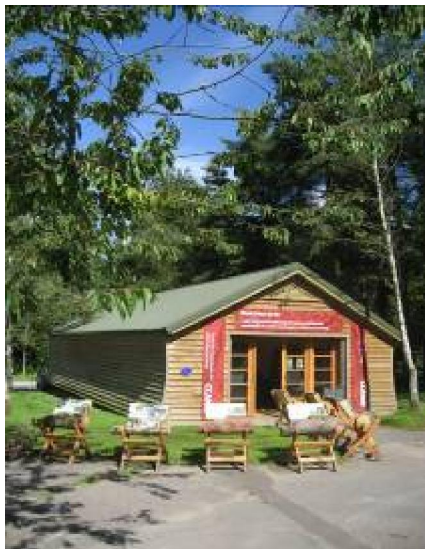
Gallery: Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World (CCANW)
Haldon Forest Park, Exeter EX6 7XR

School: Ridgeway School, Plymouth, Devon

Project theme: Creating cross-curricular links within a gallery setting

Background

The Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World (CCANW) is an educational charity which launched its Project Space in Haldon Forest Park, a Forestry Commission site near Exeter in April 2006. Its aim is to use the Arts to explore new understandings of our place within Nature. It operates a year-round programme of exhibitions and activities and is run by three part-time staff.



CCANW Project Space,
Haldon Forest Park, Nr. Exeter



The education programme has developed along with the exhibition programme, providing activities and workshops for children and young people from early years to university level. CCANW has also participated in two phases of the enquire programme as a member of the Devon gallery cluster. As the part-time Education Projects Officer, I have been responsible for devising content and delivery of workshops, from drop-ins for children and families, to organised school group visits at both primary and secondary level.

Delivering workshops particularly to schools has been a challenge; CCANW's Project Space, converted from a redundant Forestry Commission shed, is one large room and can hold a maximum of 20 pupils comfortably for a workshop.

However, the outdoor environment is also available and used as a resource and inspiration for workshop activities.

In my post, I have wanted to better understand the needs of teachers, how best to network with schools, and to develop dynamic cross-curricular access and engagement with our exhibitions on a secondary school level. Given CCANW's specific remit which explores subjects such as science and ecology as well as its location within a forest environment, it seemed essential to tackle the challenge of encouraging teachers of other subjects to appreciate and use this unique 'cultural offer'.

I was confronted most directly with this challenge during the planning and programming of an exhibition shown at CCANW in autumn 2007 called 'Greenhouse Britain'. This was an important work created by the ecological artists, the Harrisons, and tackles the question of global warming in a dynamic and visionary way. Although there were groups of young people who had come to see (and were inspired by) the exhibition, I had hoped to get geography classes too. This had proved to be extremely difficult; visiting contemporary art exhibitions appeared to be outside the norm of teaching practice in this subject.



*Greenhouse Britain:
Losing ground, gaining
wisdom
CCANW, November
2007*

My *Watch this Space* project enabled me to learn more about secondary school teaching culture and the opportunity to get to know teachers on a one-to-one basis. This was a big change to my usual methods of contact using emails, phone calls and occasional networking events.

Although I focussed on working with teachers of non-art subjects for the gallery project, I also thought it was important to observe art classes, to get an understanding of how they were taught, and to keep a dialogue open with the art department in order to encourage them to visit the art gallery too.

The aims for my school secondment and gallery project were:

- Researching and observing the curriculum of art and non-art subject(s) particularly science
- Researching if and how the art department engaged with non-art subjects for cross-curricular work
- Understanding the needs and issues of teachers to encourage them to visit the gallery
- Working with non-art secondary school staff to create a visit to CCANW with cross-curricular links.

The selected school

I chose to work with Ridgeway School, a large comprehensive with a sixth form, for several reasons. One was that it had been a school that had participated in the first wave of Creative Partnerships projects and therefore was used to working with outside agencies and partners. It is a specialist science college and located in Plymouth, the largest urban conurbation in Devon. Prior to this project, I had not worked with any Plymouth secondary schools at the CCANW Project Space.

I was first aware of Ridgeway when staff there had contacted me to source an environmental artist for an 'arts week' activity in summer 2008. From this communication, I asked if I could liaise with a member of staff from the science department to develop my *Watch This Space* project.

My contact at Ridgeway was Jen Clamp, a senior member of staff in the science department, who also enjoyed drawing and painting and therefore was sympathetic to exploring an art and science-based trip to a gallery.

The gallery-based art work

During the autumn, CCANW's exhibition programme *Haldon's Hidden Heritage* focussed on the history of the ridge and was not contemporary art based. I therefore decided the gallery visit would focus on an ongoing social sculpture research project, initially developed during an artist residency at CCANW, entitled 'University of the Trees' (UoT).

Created by artist Shelley Sacks, UoT is 'an arena and framework for exploring our relationship to the world, and for enabling us to develop actions based on insights and perceptions that derive from alternative forms of knowing.' Rather than creating 'objects of attention', Sacks has created a mobile lab or kit, comprising of 'instruments of consciousness'. The instruments include a number of felt bands with the UoT 'branding' which are tied around a selected group of trees to create a forum, slings in which participants can tie themselves to the trees and booklets for sharing thoughts and ideas.



The 'University of the Trees' bands, made of waterproofed felt

The secondment

My secondment took place over 3 days in October, November, and January with a school visit to the gallery taking place in November. My days were structured to view 3 lessons per visit, with sufficient time to talk to teachers about a range of topics including their teaching subject, their often multiple duties within the school, and how field trips were chosen and organised. I also spent time researching the year 8 and 9 National Curriculum for science as interpreted and designed by the 'specification' or textbooks supporting the exam papers followed by the Ridgeway science department.

I observed the following classes, all of which had approximately 28 – 30 pupils:

Year 8 science x 2
Year 9 science x 2
Year 10 geography

Year 9 Art
Year 11 x 2
Year 10 Art

Observations from the secondment

The science classes were streamed according to ability and I was able to observe a range of students judged low to high achieving. The lessons covered both practical experiments and theory. Effort was made by both teachers and textbook materials to show the application and relevance of science in everyday life and to make experiments more interesting by giving them an entertaining narrative starting point. However, it still seemed a challenge for many of the students to stay focussed on the tasks.

I found the year 10 GCSE geography lesson extremely interesting as the topic was on global warming. I noted it was a subject that crossed over the curriculum because I had seen it also in the year 8 science textbooks. This lesson combined a variety of activities. The students watched a short video and then researched, using computers and the limited book stock of the library, the set questions given via power point by the two teachers leading the class. This was followed by a mind mapping exercise working in pairs to

explain the answers to the set questions. I noted that there had been no time set aside within the lesson to engage the students in discussion to find out what the students already knew about the subject.

The only lesson I observed, which introduced a topic invoking the students' own experiences and knowledge base, was in an art class. The question was: did you ever have an unforgettable moment? The students were inspired by this question and the teacher was nearly overwhelmed with the very personal and often tragic moments the students were sharing about their lives. I sensed that the revelations were revealing more than he could address within an hour lesson.

The art teachers were organised and able to give me the most coherent overview of their curriculum plan and topic work. I observed one lesson which focussed on the theme of identity. Students expressed ideas about themselves using t-shirts, which they transformed with various techniques and a variety of media. Another lesson focussed on 'Art in Boxes'. The students first looked at the work of Joseph Cornell. They were then shown examples of work by former students, who used a variety of boxes and various materials and media, to create a response on the theme of living in Plymouth. The students were also encouraged to use the Young Tate website for more ideas and research.

I asked one art teacher about what she thought about the new government mandate that each child should receive 5 hours of culture a week. She replied with a hint of exasperation, 'well, you could say that's what art departments do already. We're the cultural offer'.

I also asked her if departments ever collaborated and she said they rarely did. The school culture was such that, with the pressures of delivering curricula and exam targets, departments kept to themselves. The size of the school also made it difficult for departments to communicate. It was easier for different subjects grouped within a department to work together; this did happen within the arts department, which was comprised of art, music and drama.

The teacher acknowledged that things were starting to change, and that she thought this was a good thing. She had made some attempts in her own classes to make connections with the science department and sited the work which was on display in the hallway of the science block as an example.

I visited the display. The students' artwork was the result of a brief whereby a 'science' subject (object) such as a plant cell or the human eye was selected and interpreted in the style of a famous artist they had studied. It was a well-intentioned project, but it was apparent that it had not been done in any meaningful collaboration with the science department staff.



Tiger Lilies

Tiger Lilies Latin names are *Lilium lancifolium* and *Hemerocallis Fulva*.
Tiger lilies have many medicinal purposes and are found in a wide area of America.

I have been looking at the artwork of Roy Lichtenstein to inspire my canvas. Roy Lichtenstein was born in 1923 in New York City and died in 1997 in Southampton, Long Island. Pop Art uses bold bright colours, mainly primary colours and can be produced by using blocks of colour or, as Lichtenstein used, ben-day dots. Roy Lichtenstein uses blocks of primary colours in his work and was one of the Pop Artists. I like the way that Lichtenstein uses bold, bright, block colours to make his art work eye-catching. For my canvas I used the theme of lilies, in particular Tiger Lilies, using the bold primary colours of Lichtenstein to portray the painting. Although Lichtenstein mainly worked in images of people and buildings, in a comic style, I have found that flowers work with the style just as well.

By Caroline Bell

Eyes

For my canvas project I have chosen to paint on using acrylic paint things that relate to science such as the Human eye, DNA and Atoms. I have looked at the artist M.C. Escher because I find his work very inspiring. M.C. Escher is most famous for his so-called impossible structures such as *Metamorphosis I*, *Metamorphosis II* and *Metamorphosis III*. I have linked together his style of art work and the science theme by deciding to paint my canvas different shades of grey because that is how M.C. Escher paints his art work.

By Darren Williams



Text and art from display from in the science department made by GCSE art students

During my secondment, I also learned that some departments were more likely to go on field trips than others. This was a point of contention for non-field trip focussed departments and subjects such as maths, whose teachers resented this activity because it took students out of their lessons.

Planning field trips was also difficult and time-consuming for teachers. The trip would first have to be approved through a chain of school management and this could take several weeks. Risk assessments were onerous; one of the art teachers showed me the 45-page risk assessment accompanying her day-long art trip for sixth formers to Tate Britain. But most notable (and disturbing) were the amount of offers in the form of projects, studies, competitions or other marketing, which the art department received. These were from a myriad of outside organisations such as universities, art venues and national trust properties - all eager to make connections with the school.

Gallery project

My secondment with the science department at Ridgeway School was a journey for both me and the staff to see where links could be made between science and a contemporary art gallery. Both parties were intrigued with the idea but unsure how this could be achieved.

For the gallery visit, Jen and I agreed to limit the group to fifteen year 8 and 9 students. They were chosen by the science staff on the grounds of good behaviour/work in order to give students with a range of abilities a chance to

participate. By keeping numbers to fifteen, Jen was able to minimise transport costs and only needed to use the school's mini-bus.

We agreed that this whole day visit was to be organised in the spirit of research. None of the Ridgeway staff had been to Haldon Forest Park. Jen had suggested they could do a soil experiment. The rest of the activities would be devised by me, including the use of the 'UoT' mobile lab.

Workshop outline

- Mindmap
- Observational/fact finding exercise
- Introduction to 'University of the Trees'
- Break
- Walk playtrail circuit, collect materials, listen to a story/myth
- Lunch
- Soil testing
- Making activity
- Evaluation

My objective was to create a day with a variety of experiences. I used the mindmap exercise first to find out what the students already knew about trees and to use a teaching method they were familiar with from school. In the evaluation form, this was the activity they had least enjoyed but I found it useful in order to discover how much they knew about trees and forests.

In pairs and individually, the students then used all their senses to observe and write down words to describe whatever they found in the forest. This simple activity proved to be one of the favourites of the day. It was a useful example to show how both artists and scientists shared the practice of observation.

After this activity, I led them to the UoT, where they discovered the bands around the trees and were asked what they thought was their purpose. This was followed by a short talk about Sacks' work. I then asked them to speculate what the cloth (sling) was for in the mobile lab sets. One boy suggested it was an apron and another suggested it was a giant smile. Someone finally deduced what it was for and I demonstrated how to tie themselves to the trees.



Students trying out the 'University of the Trees' slings



This activity was very well-received and when I asked them for feedback, one girl said she felt inspired while another said, 'I was thinking what the world would be like without trees and it made me sad'.

Following the break, we took a circuit walk on a well-marked trail where I acted as tour guide, relaying my knowledge on the types of trees that grew in Haldon Forest Park. We also stopped for a bit of storytelling. I told them the story 'Why the Trees Whisper' which comments on the use and abuse of trees by humankind.

After lunch, the teachers led the soil test which was part of an ongoing science project organised by the school. The students decided they wanted to take samples of the soil 'at the University'. The soil tests were not very successful, however, and the staff have decided they need to take more sophisticated equipment next time.



Soil testing with Jen Clamp, Ridgeway science teacher

The final activities – making Christmas decorations from forest materials collected along the walk and the evaluation – were rather rushed. I had decided to include the craft activity after attending a South West engage seminar where a gallery educator spoke about the importance of a ‘making’ activity within a workshop format. The students enjoyed making decorations as souvenirs of their experience at CCCANW and Haldon Forest Park.



Year 8 and 9 students making decorations from forest materials gathered during walk.

From the evaluation, it was very clear that the students thought the combination of both science and art activities worked well. But they were not able to, or did not have enough time to, articulate why this was so other than to comment ‘it’s important to have both perspectives’.

Summary of feedback from gallery and forest visit:

- Children liked a day of combining art and science around the subject of trees
- They enjoyed investigating the forest environment and documenting their observations.
- They found the ‘University of the Trees’ social sculpture project ‘inspiring’.
- The majority did not like the soil experiment (perhaps because the tests were inconclusive).

- Science teachers were more confident about taking students out for a field trip with art based activities. They liked the imaginative approach to connecting with nature.
- Making something at the end fulfilled the need for a token of the day.
- Teacher: 'By encouraging an imaginative approach to nature, we can feel more connected to it. Through empathy we can consider how to manage nature and move towards a more caring attitude. Art releases the imagination so the science can change the way we act and behave.'

Future planning

The visit was considered a success by the science staff and there are new ideas on both sides being planned for future visits.

If we were to revisit the 'University of the Trees', I would like to include a reading from Richard Dawkins' book *The Selfish Gene*. There is a provocative text describing how we are all beings that - despite having replicated and separated into a complex biodiversity – all share our beginnings from the same primordial ooze. We are more connected to trees than we think!

I would hope this type of text would illustrate the excitement and imaginative thinking which is part of the study of science as well as art.

To extend the observation activity, I would like to incorporate the use of 'quadrats' that are used in biology field tests. These are squares made of wire to mark out a space. They are placed on the ground and used to note, measure and draw everything seen within its boundaries.



Examples of quadrats used in field biology experiments.

Additionally, Ridgeway staff and I have been discussing projects we can do based on the two exhibitions CCANW is planning for spring and summer. In the spring, the exhibition will focus on the work of Peter Randall-Page, which I have discovered through the *Watch This Space* project is regularly explored in secondary school art classes. With this exhibition, Jen and I are exploring a

visit which would look at Randall-Page's focus on botanical forms and drawing – a skill important both in biology and art.

The summer exhibition will focus on water and reflections and will feature work by Susan Derges, Marlene Creates, Basia Irland and David Nash. Jen is particularly interested in this exhibition as year 8s are introduced to a unit on reflection and refraction. A trip to the exhibition could show artists' exploration of this phenomena combined with a field experiment using a tiny stream not far from CCANW's Project Space.

Impact of Watch this Space 5

The project was important in giving me the confidence to communicate with teachers in other non-art subjects about the remit of CCANW. The secondment was an excellent context for building up a relationship with a teacher. I have now established a working relationship with an individual science teacher that will help me to continue exploring the collaborative and cross-curricular possibilities for secondary school visits to CCANW.

Out of this relationship, I would like to create a body of activities and experiences which I could then disseminate at non art curriculum conferences. I think this would be an effective avenue to encouraging those teachers to access the resources of a contemporary art setting.

This project has also informed my recent collaboration with the education curator of Plymouth Arts Centre on gallery education activities. We are offering a CPD workshop for teachers of art, science, PSHE and RE around an exhibition currently showing in partnership at CCANW and four gallery venues in Plymouth called 'The Animal Gaze'. Although we do not know whether the workshop will run, we see it as an extension of the 'twilight teacher's meetings' we have individually offered to schools and a chance for gallery educators to work together on developing cross-curricular themes.

Reference

www.universityofthetrees.org

Shelley Sacks studied with Joseph Beuys through the 1970s and 1980s and is currently the Director of the Social Sculpture Research Unit at Oxford Brookes University. The University of the Trees™ project takes forward the social sculpture strategies embedded in Beuys' 'expanded conception of art', especially the awakened relationship to nature and the emphasis on ecological consciousness initiated with his 7000 Oaks project.

Appendix A

Article on the CCANW gallery visit in the Ridgeway School newspaper.

Appendix B

Examples of Ridgeway School GCSE topic work