

The aim of this resource support teaching staff when putting together a community arts project for the first time.

The Idea

2014 was the 75th Anniversary of Kingsmead School. Fortunate enough to have a vast archive of photographs and memorabilia the school had already hosted very successful re-union days for ex-students, most of them attended the school during the 1950's and 1960's. The realisation of these events reminded us that people not only enjoy, but benefit from reflecting on times gone by. Many of the children and grandchildren of these ex-pupils have also attended Kingsmead, proving that people from the local area generally spend their lives within close vicinity of where they went to school. The project was devised to expand on this and to investigate other elements of the community which helped to shape Hednesford town into what we know today. The obvious choice for this project would be the coal mining industry which served the community of Hednesford, Cannock and surrounding areas for several decades.

For over 200 years Hednesford and the surrounding areas were ruled by coal mining, providing valuable employment for many residents. There was a strong tradition of son following his father into the mine. With the last coal mining pit, Littleton Colliery, closing in 1993 the end of an era was upon us. This project was devised to remind young people of the importance of the local mining community and to celebrate the men who dedicated their lives to the industry, creating brotherhood and camaraderie.

Textiles would be the medium of choice for this project. An up and coming textile artist called Julia Jowett had been recommended. Julia's profile mirrored the project perfectly as she combined traditional stitch techniques alongside contemporary processes. The chemistry between myself as project co-ordinator and Julia was strong, even during the initial phone call confirmed that our relationship would be one of longevity. From experience I can confirm that if you have a good rapport with the other professional practitioners involved in the project then the project often thrives and has an extra sparkle.

Working with an artist and requiring specialist art materials required additional funding. A successful application was made to Staffordshire Community Arts Fund. There are many funding sources available to access, varying in size from just a few hundred pounds to several thousand. If you are writing a bid for the first time it is sensible to apply for a smaller amount. This is because the application form will often

ask what experience you have of running similar projects. You should aim to build a portfolio of projects over time.

The purpose of the project was to raise awareness of the degenerative coal mining industry amongst a small group of young people from the district. The outcome would be a body of work which would go on display to raise awareness within the wider community as to what impact the mining industry has had on their local community. We wanted to increase the student's sense of community and forge new partnerships. This would be achieved through meetings with ex-miners, talking to them and listening to their stories and experiences. We wanted to explore the issue of current employment opportunities and future aspirations within the local district. Raising questions about what industries have replaced coal mining and possible how the visual landscape has changed. We wanted to celebrate the values and employment of our past community and promote community features such as comradeship and unity. The project aimed to inform young people about the mining industry which was prevalent over the last 100 years and encourage them to visit the local museum more frequently.

The project would be facilitator led by the Head of Art at Kingsmead, however collaborative in approach with its many partners: The Museum of Cannock Chase, artist Julia Jowett, film maker Charlotte Bailey, Specialist Craft Art Supplies and Kingsmead School. The project would be driven by the young people involved with passive support from the local community.

We wanted pupils to think about their local community in a different way. They would have the opportunity to engage with people of different ages. The project would also allow ex- miners to share their experiences with a younger generation, reflecting and reminiscing as part of the process. The Museum of Cannock Chase was keen to support the project. Always seeking to engage with youngsters from the 16-19 year old bracket, the Museum offered match funding for the application in the form of staff time and classrooms to work in.

The Outline

The initial plan was for the project to run through one term. Julia Jowett would work closely with the pupils exposing them to a range of textile specific methods of working. The pupils would apply these methods to and produce a collaborative textile piece which would be donated to the local museum for their permanent collection. We would make a documentary film of the project.

The project would include several excursions in order to gain valuable first hand experiences and references. Becoming increasingly more difficult to take pupils out of

school due to restrictive risk assessments or the demands on assessment and exams, special projects or community arts projects can make a good case for external visits. Seek out your designated educational visits officer for more information. In addition to this the cost of the visits are normally covered by the funding attached to the project. In the case of this project the focus was on the local community keeping planning for excursions simple. We were able to walk to all venues, the local high street, shops, and the park and to the museum.

Two full day escorted site visits and subsequent workshops would allow students to spend valuable time working with the professional artist. The funding allows the students to get exposure to new and specialist techniques which they may not have access to as part of their everyday education. Julia Jowett looks back at old stories and fairy tales to provide inspiration within her work. She seeks out the narrative and illustrates it through intricate wire work embellished with hand embroidery. Her embroidery work is traditional in approach and incredibly intricate. Presentation is fresh and unusual combinations of techniques demonstrate imagination. Her work clearly echoed the concept of the project, her lively approach, energy and positive attitude was a bonus.

The Museum of Cannock Chase suggested that we produce work which could be permanently archived. The notion that the work would be a record of a particularly moment in time was one which appealed. This was a high standard to set for the pupils involved knowing that their work would be accessible to others and referred to in the future. Students can get their first real experiences of what it might be like to work in the arts when taking part in a Community Arts Project. Students raise their awareness of time restraints, costs, legal requirements and health and safety. Students have to work as a group of learners and have to develop skills to communicate a various levels. The project turned out to be multi-disciplinary, not just based around textiles but touched on various aspects of the arts, media, technology and citizenship.

The final outcomes would be presented to the local community in a hope to promote reflection and celebration. Most importantly the outcome would encourage opportunities for local dignitaries to consider future employment opportunities, forthcoming change and the imminent prospects for the local area. We wanted the pupils to decide how they would deliver the final outcome and be heavily involved in the organisation of this aspect of the project.

Securing Commitment

Delivering the project as part of a vocational qualification ensured commitment from the young people involved. Students rise to the challenge when they are asked to produce work for a live brief or project. Getting students to bring a project to a close by a given deadline can be difficult, but when faced with the notion of letting down a visitor or outside agency, most students will graciously rise to the challenge and produce work of their best ever ability. It can be difficult to judge how much commitment students will give to a project and how long they will sustain that level of promise. A project which uses outside agencies or with a public outcome will keep pupils absorb until the end, often they want projects to continue or request more of the same.

Often it can be a chicken and egg scenario when planning for a project which has external funding attached to it. Artists and companies will gladly put the project in their diary but will only be able to hold the time for you for so long, they would need to know sooner rather than later regarding successful applications. Keep in touch with them on a regular basis and keep them up to date with any progress. Always be positive and ensure a sound relationship is being built even at this stage. If your funding doesn't come good this time you may need to try other sources. You wouldn't want to waste all of the time you have spent planning and organising your project.

Most funding applications require match funding before you can make an application. You will rarely be allocated money unless you can show that you have others who are prepared to get behind the project. In the case of this project The Museum of Cannock Chase was able to offer match funding in the form of classroom space, access to the galleries and designated staff hours for the duration of the research sessions. This provided approx. half of the match funding required. Kingsmead School itself was able to offer the remaining match funding through materials and staff hours.

Drawing up the Plan

Time restraints are the most difficult part of any project. As mentioned previously using the project as part of the pupils vocational qualification allowed us to use the student's timetables as the major timeline for all the planning. Student lessons and important assessment dates provided the key points for the project.

Essential to raise expectations for the project you do this through your own enthusiasm and passion. Using the local mining community for this project gave a challenging theme and initially appeared dull and un-interesting to 16 year old

youngsters. We conducted research and looked at the work of a variety of contemporary textile work to engage and inspire. Even though you might have a strong vision for the final outcome it is important to allow pupils to have ownership of the project. They will have their own ideas and interpretations of the given brief. If possible build in time during the practical workshops to allow this to happen. Likewise have a few variations of the theme prepared as it is difficult to judge how pupils will react to a certain theme or process. Evaluate as you go and don't be afraid to turn a corner if necessary.

Securing the Funding

The initial ideas for this project were much bigger but the funding allocated for the project was really quite small. As mentioned previously once you have successfully delivered a funded arts project you can start to apply for larger sums of money. Find out when the deadline is for your funding application. In this case funding is allocated once per year so we applied almost a full year prior to the start date of this project. Some funding sources do not allow you to deliver projects in curriculum time, for obvious reasons. Be prepared that your project may need to run at lunchtime, after school or through Saturday School. In the past I have run specific projects over the summer holidays. Check with your Head Teacher if this is going to be possible before applying for your funding. You have to write an evaluation of your project once complete and include statistics, data and evidence, so your funding provider may find out if you do not adhere to the rules.

The funding applications can be quite lengthy. The process is a useful one, ensuring you have clearly planned and unpicked the true purpose and intention of the idea. Reflection and evaluation at the very early stages will only ensure you deliver an excellent project further down the line. I would recommend that you discuss your application form prior to applying. Your provider may have a direct point of contact or your local authority may be able to help.

How not to upset the other staff

Removing pupils from other lessons to take part in workshops and visits did cause some issues with other staff. Understandably colleagues can become very protective of their own lessons. Ensure pupils promise to catch up with work should they miss other lessons because of your art project. Early communication and agreement would always be the most successful approach. Talk with other staff from the outset, get them involved in the project if possible and consider a cross-curricular approach.

Once people can see that a project is going to be successful they are keen to be involved. Ask colleagues to help with refreshments, tickets, printing, and displays. You will be surprised at how much support you can get. Maybe ask the students involved to request the help from the other staff, they will be less likely to resist their charms.

Resources

The amount of time it takes to co-ordinate this type of project should not be underestimated. The planning starts months before the project does. Your time is taken up acting as a project co-ordinator. Dealing with changes along the way can also be time consuming. Remaining positive throughout is essential within the role.

For this project we were able to walk to all of the venues which really saved us money on travel expenses. As this project focused on the immediate community we were able to be flexible in our approach. We were able to respond to any changes and demands of the project very easily.

All of the funding for this project was absorbed by the two artists involved. This meant that we needed to consider a very cost effective way of producing the work. Our artist, Julia Jowett is very thrifty in her approach. She is very resourceful and students learn that they should also be cautious with the budget. We had a small budget for materials but managed to secure some donated art materials from one of our educational suppliers. Film maker Charlotte Bailey agreed to make the film at a preferential rate. Charlotte was an ex-pupil of Kingsmead School and had recently graduated with a degree in Media and Art. She was keen to work alongside young people and gain work experience in preparation for an application for a PGCE Course. Pupils found Charlotte inspirational. She was able to relate to them at every level, provide valuable advice and support relating to the pressures of work load, job prospects and university life. Charlotte had also been involved in Community Arts Projects during her time at Kingsmead and was able to remind pupils of the benefits and strengths of this time of work. This project has made a positive contribution to her portfolio and she was able to make contacts through the project and secure additional work.

Final Preparations

As part of the preparation for the final presentation outside professionals were invited to provide feedback to the students. For this particular project the Head Teacher was heavily involved in the final stages of the project. He provided valuable feedback after early rehearsals. Changes were made to the visuals on the power point. Experienced as a public speaker Mr Bryant provided sound words of advice for

the pupils to act upon. Recommendations were also made regarding voice projection and the seating arrangements of the auditorium. The way in which the school would be viewed within its local community is an important one, students were aware that they must work together with their Head Teacher at this important stage of the project.

Local dignitaries, councillors and historians attended the final presentation. Invitations were sent out in advance to allow for busy work schedules. Invitations were designed by the students, in keeping with the project theme; both e-invites and traditional postal ones were used. Organisation of this aspect of the project was led by the teacher with as much pupil involvement as possible. An accurate record of attendees to the event must be kept as it helps with the logistical arrangements and security on the day.

The notion of presenting to an audience is an exciting one. Unfortunately we experienced difficulties that some students were completely overwhelmed by the attention and were overcome with nerves prior to the event. We were able to overcome this by delegating appropriate roles to each student depending upon their strength within the group.

The Outcome

The final outcome concluded as a collaborative textile banner which combined a variety of textile techniques and processes. The traditional hand stitch techniques of bullion stitch and blanket stitch derivative of times gone by were blended with image transfer machine embroidery. The group found it challenging to decide on the final composition and spent a lot of time rearranging the individual samplers before eventually settling on the final design. The real rewards were reaped on the day of the final presentation when all the invited guests gushed over the work and were keen to discuss the project with the pupils. The turnout was excellent and the atmosphere ensured even the most nervous pupils were energised. Feedback sheets were circulated to gain a written response from guests. The following comments were made; “An interesting and inspiring project in which pupils have used textiles as a method of engaging with their local community” and “Beautiful work, it should go on display in the local area, possibly at the library?”

The students also produced a collection of framed pieces which have been exhibited in the coffee shop at The Museum of Cannock Chase. As a temporary exhibition we were able to ensure that the work achieved additional exposure and through information sheet being placed on each table all visitors were able to learn about the project. The school also achieved significant exposure through this exhibition. Heavily influenced by Julia Jowett the box frames feature wire, blanket stitch and archive

photographs the frames allowed an individual response from each student. These pieces also allowed us to use wire as a method of recording shape, giving another dimension to the portfolio.

The film definitely allowed the emotion of the project to be revealed. The relationship between the pupil and the work is apparent. The feeling of disappointment towards the end of the project is clearly evident. The theme of coal mining had first appeared dull and uninteresting. This project had cultivated a sense of togetherness and community, and a new friendship had been forged between the group and the artists. Julie and Charlotte had become such familiar faces that the pupils looked forward to their attendance and often unexpected visits to the sessions. Both artists confirmed their real enjoyment of the project and could see further potential in the work and wished for additional funding so the project could continue to grow and develop.

Publicising Success

Document your project throughout to provide valuable evidence for a number of reasons. This may include pupil evidence for qualifications, your own CDP record and valuable evidence for your funding evaluation. For this project we had decided to make a documentary film of the project securing a permanent professional evidence base. The aspirational and new technology element of the project allowed the pupils involved to work alongside the film maker and gain valuable insight into her work, developing skills within another area. The animations seen in the film were produced using the artist's actual software and equipment.

The film was shown in tutor time, multiplying the number of students who have benefited from the funding. This also allows kudos for the students involved. Placing the film on the websites of the Museum of Cannock Chase and Kingsmead School also ensure additional coverage and accessibility. The local press were keen to publicise the project. They attended the showcase event and we also received additional press coverage for some weeks afterwards.

Building on the Work

The skills which pupils gain from these types of project are transferable and beneficial to all. Confidence, enthusiasm and respect were all mentioned by students as part of the evaluation process. An improved relationship between the teacher and their pupils is inevitable. The work completed away from school allows the teacher to see

the pupils in a non-classroom environment. The teacher also becomes a learner as they take part in the practical workshops alongside their students, experiencing the challenge of learning new skills and making difficult decisions about the project with the pupils. The students say in the film that they feel they have more confidence to deal with outside agencies and have a greater understanding of time restraints and cost issues. They should hopefully continue to apply this knowledge to their studies from this point onwards.

I believe it is essential for the students to observe you as a professional practitioner going on the journey with them. That you also will face problems and difficulties along the way and that as part of your working practice you must also negotiate, discuss, re-plan and re-schedule while considering all the various elements of the project including the educational value for the student. Many of the parents appreciate the hard work of all involved and were appreciative of the valuable experience which their child had been exposed to. One of the pupils involved has gone on to complete work experience alongside Julia Jowett at her workshop in Stafford, and another is keen to pursue a University Degree in film making influenced by Charlotte Bailey.

Final Thoughts

We set out to raise awareness of the degenerative coal mining industry in Hednesford and to use textile techniques and processes to do this. We wanted to increase the student's sense of community and forge new partnerships, all of which was definitely achieved. Through local councillors and associations attending the presentation event we hope that questions have been raised regarding employment opportunities for young people, and raise the relevance of art and design as a tool for communication. We developed new relationships with people in the local community: The shop keepers, The Museum of Cannock Chase. It is essential to maintain this for future projects. Through the film it is evident that the students really bonded during the project and enjoyed the sense of purpose established through this type of project. The work is now in permanent achieve at The Museum of Cannock Chase and featured as part of their re-launch after refurbishment.

Further Information