

Us
Strathmore Centre Lloyds TSB Project 98/99

Evaluation Report January 2000

“This exhibition is totally bowdacious. Rock on dudes”

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Introduction

The chance to have their own work exhibited was “a whole new experience” (Alison). Holly added “it makes me feel proud that I could do this”.

I also feel proud to have been involved with the young people from the Strathmore centre and have very similar feelings of accomplishment.

The idea

The Strathmore project built upon existing partnerships with Richmond Youth Service and represented a development from *Unstable 1998 - Young Curators* an exhibition produced in association with Heatham House Youth Club and funded by the London Arts Board. It was clear that such an opportunity had visible benefits to the participants, most of whom went on to study fine art at college.

When I heard about the Lloyds TSB initiative which was being supported by the Museums Association it seemed that there was now a perfect opportunity to reach out to a new audience - young people who had fallen outside of the education system.

Having worked with a number of other groups marginalised in our society, I had been concerned for some time about what happened to young people permanently excluded from full time education and their level of access to museums and galleries.

I discovered the existence of the Strathmore Centre in Teddington and its involvement with young people aged 10-17 who are considered to be in need of personal support because of significant social or educational difficulties or offending behaviour. The full time day programme which caters for 15-16 year olds aims to assist young people in their transition to a more responsible and fulfilling adulthood.

The discovery that many of the young people attending the Strathmore centre had not actually been excluded and that they had simply never been to school for some time, came as quite a shock.

Aims

The key aim was to make museums and galleries more accessible to young people. Katherine Greening from the Strathmore centre made the point that the project “was meeting a need”.

Objectives

We hoped to achieve this aim by creating an exhibition in May 1999 and work towards that exhibition with gallery staff in the preceding seven months.

Originally I had intended the project to tie in with *Changing Places* an exhibition examining the role of historic houses through the work of contemporary photographer Stephen Gill.

Process - Initial Visit

Having secured the funds it was time to approach the young people themselves. Funding must be secured in advance - as trust is a very big issue for all young people at risk it would be very damaging to promise a project without being able to guarantee that it would take place.

It was interesting that the response I received on my first visit was “Why us?”. This became very pertinent to the project as a whole and shaped the theme of the final exhibition in the Stables.

The staff from the Strathmore Centre were also very cautious to begin with and were keen to advise me about the language I used when speaking with the young people. Words like Museum, Gallery, Curator and Historic Buildings were at all costs to be avoided.

The Workshops

It soon became apparent that the original topic would have to be adapted to meet the needs of the target group. Staff at the centre felt that the young people had too many preconceptions about historic houses resulting partly from a negative visit to a National Institution and that this might compromise the success of the project. To begin with we focused upon “places of interest” for the video and photography work.

Unlike working with secondary schools, there was great flexibility in the way in which the week at Strathmore is organised. Many of the visits took place as part of Monday Group Work and the regular art sessions and it was also possible for me to make other visits out with two or three of the young people.

Visits were arranged with photographer Stephen Gill and video documentary maker Jon Briest over the next few months, enabling the group to take a number of photographs and to make their own video documentary.

Many of the visits involved the whole group although I did arrange smaller visits following the interests of the young people to complete the video documentary. The young people were keen to show their individual skills on the final edit.

During the year we also promoted art sessions based at the centre and the young people decided to include various paintings, drawings, ceramics and woodwork in the final selection.

The Visits

We visited “places of interest” - these represented a change in focus to the eight historic houses which Stephen Gill had been commissioned to photograph for the *Changing Places* exhibition which opened at Orleans in May 1999.

As Stephen had a background in photographing football stadia we visited **Twickenham Rugby Ground** and **Fulham Football Team’s Training Ground** at Roehampton. This also enabled us to focus on a genuine interest in football shared by the whole group in an attempt to engage everyone in the idea of the exhibition.

Three of the other visits did fall within the historic houses and gardens agenda. These included **Kew Gardens**, **Richmond Park** and **Orleans House Gallery**. The young people visited the gallery and stables several times during the project and the buildings became familiar and comfortable. They were very aware of being in and using an historic property. The young people who installed and invigilated the exhibition were conscious that this experience had dramatically altered their idea of museums and old buildings. In addition, their relationship with Stephen Gill made their experience of the *Changing Places* exhibition a far more positive one, as they had developed a greater understanding of the process involved.

The other visits were much more personal to individuals within the group. The excursions to **Heatham House Recording Studio** and **Hampton Skate Park** were undertaken in very small groups without other staff from the centre. These visits provided the young people with a chance to record on video their singing and skate boarding skills.

The Exhibition

By May the group had complete ownership of the Stables project, they had designed their own posters and private view cards, selected the exhibits, written the text, installed the exhibition, collected the video equipment, staffed the exhibition and organised their own private view.

The exhibition included a projection of the video, and large versions of the photographs they had taken.

The wording for the title of the exhibition included the first names of each group member. The simple sub heading “**Us - Meet the Strathmore Centre 98/99**” summed up the spirit of the documentary footage.

The Private View

This event is essential to the success of such a project. By their very nature private views are about access and for the young people to make decisions about who to invite, what refreshments to serve and what music to listen to made it a very special evening. The added benefit of a celebrity guest - Stuart Castledene from Wimbledon Football Club was the “cherry on the cake”. For so many young people to feel so totally comfortable within a gallery context that we didn't lock up till nearly 10pm was a great achievement.

Evaluation

The evaluative material took the form of written reports by myself as the project co-ordinator at the gallery, by Jon Briest, video documentary maker and by Katherine Greening at the Strathmore Centre. Interviews with the young people provided extremely valuable feedback. A range of responses from the young people are also included in the video diary itself and the text which the young people included in exhibition. The responses of the visiting public were recorded on a comments board which was installed within the exhibition. Contact with the centre has continued with plans for an exhibition in May 2000, involving with the new year 11 in-take as well as contact with individuals from the 1999 project group.

Finance

The project was funded by a grant from Lloyds TSB. Originally the project had been budgeted at £10,000 in total, with an anticipated grant of £5,000 from Lloyds TSB. When the project was awarded just £2,500, the technical aspects of the project had to be scaled down. This had an affect upon the amount of time that could be devoted to editing the video documentary and the equipment used for projection.

The total expenditure for the project was £4,776.82, £2,276.82 of this amount was covered by the London Borough of Richmond largely to support time spent by the gallery co-ordinating the project. The cost of staff time was greatly underestimated in the original project budget, equipment cost savings were made to compensate for this and where possible equipment was borrowed on a low hire or no cost basis.

The Outcomes, Positive Benefits

The Young People

- Self confidence and a sense of achievement.
- Sense of belonging, being trusted and ownership.
- Group and Communication skills.
- Challenging their preconceptions about museums and galleries - that it could be for them, young not stuffy or inaccessible, not just about famous artists.
- Work experience/ Responsibility for the exhibition.

- Financial - for those that were paid for helping to staff the exhibition during opening hours.
- Special visits out.

The Strathmore Centre

- It was meeting a need for the young people.
- Funding.
- Prestige - social services and education.
- Understanding of museums and galleries and their potential role.
- Multi-agency working.
- Focus to a regular Monday group work session.
- Improving arts provision within the centre.

Orleans House Gallery

- A successful and well received community exhibition.
- Audience development - promoting provision for young people.
- More inclusive exhibitions policy.
- Challenging preconceptions about young people amongst staff and regular visitors.
- Developing integral education and exhibition policy.
- Developing staff skills in engaging young people at risk.
- Developing understanding of needs of young people, to engage young people, museums and galleries have to involve themselves in youth culture and offer interaction.
- Confidence to embark on new projects - H.L.F. pending for new project working with unemployed young people.

Lessons learned

Focus of the project: With so many issues in their own lives, it was clear that for the whole group to concentrate upon just one theme would prove very difficult. I was aware that the centre themselves were unsure about the outcome of the project and we were anxious to make the experience a positive one for us all. By focusing on the group themselves, the exhibition developed a life of its own and I was very pleased that the five of the young people took control of the final product. In future, with greater confidence in working with this audience group and their centres, I will have the insight and confidence to introduce more ambitious themes.

Time: The problem for museum and galleries is that these projects take up so much staff time. For young people at risk, trust is crucial, I was able to make a serious commitment to the group which they responded to. It is also important where possible to follow an academic year from start to finish.

Numbers: As with other areas of special needs work, in order to ensure success, group numbers need to be small. This does have implications for funders. Thirteen young people were involved directly with this project. When staff at the centre, the gallery, the artists, visitors, parents and carers are added the numbers increase significantly.

Cultural context: One of the most interesting things that came out of the evaluation with the young people was that they failed to realise how professional the exhibition would be and for some this meant they regretted not having been more involved. All of the young people found it difficult to imagine the end product as they had no experience of exhibitions, museums or galleries. This made it quite difficult for them to take complete ownership of the project.

Empathy with the young people: Where young people are at risk it is vital to build a relationship, to communicate appropriately and remain flexible. In this particular group there

were “looked after” young people, pregnancies, young mothers, young people from broken homes, with criminal records and several who had experienced abuse or attempted suicide. These issues reflect DfEE analysis of young people at risk as well as young people permanently excluded from Secondary education.

For many of the young people the Strathmore centre provided a supportive caring environment in which I was proud to be included. One of the most powerful moments captured on video is when I asked Alison, “What’s the worst thing about the Strathmore Centre?” she replied, “The weekends - because we have to go home”.

Many of the young people were worried that the exhibition would be some kind of test and were very wary - all of these issues can be picked up on the video which is deliberately raw. When we talked about the language used by some of the young people in the final edit, the group decided not to censor swear words. Alison spoke for everyone when she argued, “**That’s us isn’t it, that’s how we are**”.

Maturity: Many of young people are old for their years because of their difficult life experiences, it is important to treat them as equals and thereby encourage mature responses.

Trust: It is important to build relationships, to keep promises and invest time. Although my own background was very far removed from that of the young people, with time I became familiar to them and they accepted me on their terms. The fact that I was invited to the end of year prize day and meal signalled that I had become part of the Strathmore family.

Sometimes young people at risk cannot be trusted, it is important to make sure that the centre gives the support needed to cope with this and safeguard aspects of the gallery/museum that need safeguarding - we must not forget that most young people at risk have criminal records for theft.

Flexibility: Never have too fixed an idea about the outcomes. Staff at the centre were very concerned that my expectations were too high and that ultimately I would be disappointed. Through patience and determination the project did succeed and the young people did achieve beyond everyone’s expectations.

Communication: It is important that young people feel that they can contribute to and understand the project and that staff feel language used by gallery staff is appropriate, there is a very fine line between being patronising and not providing enough help. Many young people at risk have low literacy and language skills and yet in general they have a sense of maturity (brought about by their home lives) which must be respected.

Documentation: I kept a project diary and maintained a dialogue about the progress of the project with the young people and centre co-ordinators throughout. Interviewing the young people was definitely the best way of gaining feedback other than the information they decided to give for the video diary. As the project was photography based and therefore the emphasis was upon the young people taking their own images it was sometimes difficult to have a good visual record of their active participation. It would have been helpful to have taken more photographs of the young people videoing each other, working on the exhibition installation and invigilation.

The Way Forward

- Continued contact with some of the young people, work experience/advisory role.

- Continued contact with the centre.
- Planned project with new year 11 in-take - community exhibition planned for May 2000.
- Contact with other centres locally - project with year 10 currently based at the Pupil Referral Unit, Hounslow planned for 2000.
- Advocacy for future projects elsewhere - MA case study/ SEMS skills sharing.

Development for the Future - the New DfEE Guidelines on Social Inclusion

I recently attended a “Social Inclusion: pupil support” conference for Headteachers/Governors and outside agencies in Hounslow, organised as a response to new statutory guidance regarding exclusion from mainstream education.

Issued in July 1999, circular 10/99 provides guidance on behaviour, exclusions and reintegration promoting intervention and prevention, multi-agency working. In its widest context reduction of social exclusion is seen as an agent in the reduction of crime, the encouragement of employment and community support.

New pastoral support programmes in schools will be established to reduce the number of pupils permanently excluded. These programmes may involve work placements and special projects. Museums and galleries may have a role to play in supporting these in school centres, helping to provide a focus for pupils at risk. One of the case studies mentioned in the guidelines is the Zaccaeus pre exclusion centre in Birmingham where “creative arts and drama teach co-operation and collaboration with others”.

As schools will be allocated funds to implement new pupil support programmes, there may be opportunities for small scale outreach projects with museums and galleries. The youth service and voluntary organisations have already been indicated as useful agents and the disapplication of the National Curriculum will help to introduce museum based projects for year 11 pupils. Many charities/companies may also be willing to support programmes that help young people at risk such as Children in Need/High Street Banks.

Appendix includes:

- Financial Report.
- Report from Katherine Greening - Strathmore Centre Link Worker.
- Report from Jon Briest - video documentary maker.
- Feedback from the young people (based on interviews May 1999).
- Article which appeared in Museum Practise.
- Photographs of the *Unstable* exhibition 1998, project visits, exhibition installation and private view.
- Excerpts of exhibition comments board, letters of support/thanks.

Evaluation From Jon Briest - video documentary maker

Aims

The aim for producing the video changed part way through the project. The finished piece was “made for the young people” although to begin with I thought there would be an element of making an artistic piece for the gallery. My role became that of facilitator and editor of the footage recorded by the young people.

The Initial Visit

I was very shocked when I first met the young people and felt that the project would be a very difficult undertaking. Some of the young people were not actually present and of those that attended, two walked out halfway through the presentation and the others talked throughout. They were noticeably aggressive to one another and I was very shocked by the language they used in a classroom environment.

I was also shocked by the attitude of the staff to the project and the message they seemed to be giving the young people. The project was something they could get involved with if they wanted to. I really did ask myself can this really work and what am I letting myself in for?

Shooting the footage

We shot the video in a way that the young people could understand and thereby allowed them artistic ownership. I had to quickly learn to let go and follow their moods and intuitions rather than get them to follow aims dictated by a plan. Usually in documentary film making there is a pre-defined structure, however we found the stories in the footage shot rather than going after a particular story.

I was surprised to see how inventive the young people were with the camera. They were very quick to become familiar with the equipment, were fascinated by the technology and worked well at passing it amongst themselves. Effectively we gave them a camera and some tape and waited to see what they came back with. There was a great deal of interest in watching the videos and often they revealed a great deal about the dynamics of the group and the challenging behaviour of particular individuals.

The group rapidly became at ease with the video camera, passing it between them like a game of ‘it’, ‘it’ pursuing rather than being chased, always demanding a reaction or response, a ‘smile’ for the camera. It was amazing to see how through the camera they were looking at things very differently and were analysing their own situation.

The Editing Process

Throughout filming and editing the piece I was very conscious of the fact that I hadn’t got the written or verbal permission of the young people themselves to appear in the video. When I videoed them they became very self conscious, would almost walk away whereas when one of them had the camera they would play up to it and open up.

There was a time constraint involved in editing the video which meant that there wasn’t time to include material from all the tapes even though there were some very interesting sequences in the gallery visit tape and also in the graffiti workshop in the stables tape.

We included the bits which were most illuminating about each of the characters, cut out the sections that didn’t work or were too long. It would have been good to have had time for one of the young people to create a voice over narrative for the video and to have commented on what was taking place. Instead we presented a “slice of Strathmore life”. There were problems with the editing (the time-codes that appear for instance). We had to include

material that reflected the young people's interests, what they wanted to show people rather than the footage that might have been most interesting for the gallery.

Feedback to the video presentation in the exhibition

Guests that I invited to the show had various preconceptions of excluded young people - these were challenged by the exhibition. Far from appearing aggressive, sad and of low intelligence, one visitor commented on how creative, happy and full of life they appeared, "charming children".

For the young people shooting the video gave them an enormous confidence boost even more so when they saw themselves on the big screen in the gallery. They were each made a copy of the video to take away with them as a record of the exhibition.

Positive Outcomes and Lessons Learned

I was impressed by the gallery side of the project which was so professional. It was also interesting to see how the dynamics of the group had changed by the end of the project. By the private view the group seemed more cohesive, articulate and happy than they had to begin with. The fact that the private view came about near to the end of the Strathmore year was very poignant.

For me personally the project helped me to develop my own skills as an editor and also my skills in communicating with young people. Placing the final edit within a gallery context was also very interesting for me as I learned more about the technology of video projection. The project didn't require such a high level of expertise although I could see that it was important for the young people that I was an employee of the BBC and that their work had been edited, albeit in down time, at a high-end non linear editing suite.

I would have liked to have filmed a more objective documentary about the group. Some of the young people were interested in film and television as a medium and could be very perceptive and intelligent. However peer pressure, group reactions and time pressures meant that I couldn't capitalise on this and provide more information about techniques to give them more ownership of materials.

I was not able to spend as much time as Rachel building up their trust and therefore wasn't able to relate to them as well as she did, it would have been difficult to get the consents from the young people and it would have taken far longer.

Ultimately I was overwhelmed by the creativity of the young people. They were totally uninhibited in front of the camera, they took it and ran with it. I was personally very pleased to have taken part and enjoyed working with the group from Strathmore.

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Evaluation from the young people

The following information and quotes are based upon interviews with the young people during the exhibition in May. In addition many individuals wrote their responses on our exhibition "Comments Board". These include, "All the work is really good and everybody has worked really hard", "(Wicked and Groovey Dudes) I never want to leave", "This exhibition is totally bowdacious. Rock on dudes. COWABUNGA". "Well, who would have thought it!! Well Done".

General Impressions

“It was great everyone enjoyed it”.

The young people were impressed by the way that together the pieces of artwork filled the Stables as at the centre. “Before, when we looked at what we had it didn’t really look like anything”.

The chance to have their own work exhibited/ Installing the exhibition was “a whole new experience”. “It makes me feel proud that I could do this”.

“While I was working on the exhibition, I wasn’t on the streets committing as many crimes, therefore if they gave the youth of today more things to occupy our minds the crime rate would go down”.

Responses to the Private View

Talking about the private view “It was a laugh”, “I thought it would be boring but it boosted our self esteem”.

“We were glad people made the effort to come”.

What would you change if we did the exhibition again?

“I didn’t realise how successful it would be , if there was a next time I’d try much harder”.

“I would never have considered a career in art but now I realise what I am capable of I might”.

“We would have taken it more seriously, we didn’t think it would be as public as this or as formal”, “the captions would not have been so personalised, so difficult for people outside the group to understand them”.

Many thought that if we did the exhibition again it should be “the same one but with a different theme”.

Has this changed your impression of what museums and galleries are about?

When asked whether this changed their ideas about art galleries, the group were very enthusiastic about the fact that their own artwork had been displayed and seen by the public. This contrasted with their visit to a larger art gallery earlier in the year, “People make you feel its not for you”.

“I thought they [museums and galleries] were boring, full of boring people then we met Rachel from the Stables”.

One or two of the young people had never visited a museum or gallery before, and “thought museums were rubbish”. “If they were more modern, young people would want to visit, especially if it was all made by young people”. Crucially friends of the young people outside the centre who visited “thought it was all right”.

Some feedback on Rachel as co-ordinator of the project:

When asked about my role as the project co-ordinator, many of the young people felt that I had been scared of them to begin with and that they were wary of “coming up with our own ideas”.

“We respect you more because you’re near to our age range and know what we need”.

For those who were not that involved in the project, I asked why they chosen not to participate a great deal?

There were some interesting responses:

“I didn’t do much because I wasn’t told to”, others commented “You didn’t put your foot down as much as you could have done” and that as a co-ordinator I “could have been more strict”.

Some of the young people didn’t think the project was for them, “ I wasn’t really interested - I was more into football”.

About the video:

Everyone participated in the video diary and therefore it became the key element of the exhibition. There is footage of the whole group included as well as footage taken by each group member over the various sessions.

When I asked them about the abusive/strong language which we had decided not edit out of the video, one of the young people spoke for everyone when she declared “That’s Us, isn’t it? That’s how we are.”

Other feedback:

Staff from the centre and other visitors also wrote on the comments board. A special needs teacher from Hounslow wrote, “A very talented group of young people. Thank you for the invitation to view the exhibition”. “Well done to you all! Some excellent exhibits and lovely poetry. You are all very special people - come to more weddings!” (Richmond Registrar). Teacher and partner to a member of the Strathmore team wrote, “Its so impressive, it just shows that you can achieve anything and everything that you want to”.