

enquire about learning in galleries



Briefing note 2: self-directed learning

This is the second in a series of briefing notes about how gallery education is addressing key issues in current arts and education policy.

engage is the National Association of Gallery Education, representing visual arts organisations, gallery educators, teachers, artist educators and curators. We carry out research, training and advocacy and have a powerful network of people who work face-to-face with millions of gallery visitors, developing interest in and enjoyment of the visual arts.

enquire is a major research programme in partnership with Arts Council England and the Museums Libraries and Archives Council.

The potential for high quality, sustained partnerships between young people and creative professionals to inspire learning and develop life skills is widely recognised. The **enquire** programme focuses on the learning benefits and the conditions for effective learning in galleries.

When it reports in July 2008, the **enquire** programme will bring detailed findings from long-term projects across England. At the interim stage, we are already seeing strong evidence of how gallery education engages young people with art and also addresses education priorities. This briefing focuses on **self-directed** and **personalised learning**.

Key findings:

- Through working with artists in galleries, young people take increased responsibility for the directions and outcomes of their learning.
- They set their own parameters, make their own decisions about what to learn and develop their own ideas.
- Working with professional artists brings an understanding of the process of creativity – and pupils began to experiment.
- Peer review is important, where young people analyse and criticise their own work and that of others. Different formats for these discussions (such as video interviews, panel discussions and Big Brother-style 'diary rooms') are especially powerful.
- Not being told what to do, and dealing with material where there is no right or wrong answer – handling ambiguity – can be disorientating at first, but can lead to real growth.
- Teachers can find the early stages challenging, too, as they recast normal relationships and young people take more control!
- Being treated as an adult, with the opportunity to explore adult roles, was not what the pupils had expected.
- Through the projects young people make rapid progress, including those who had previously been disruptive.
- Improved interpersonal skills, based on a high level of empathy for the feelings of others, are demonstrated throughout the projects.



Through the **enquire** programme, **engage** is developing a unique knowledge-base for policy-makers and practitioners. And through our networks, we have the capacity to drive up the quality of activity in galleries on a national scale. For further information on how schools and others can take advantage of this fantastic resource – visit **www.engage.org**

Case studies



Michael's story

Michael's **enquire** group used the Berwick Film and Media Festival and the British Art Show 6 as a springboard for discussions around video art – attempting to define it and understand how it differs from use of the moving image through television and film.

The students from Berwick Community High School were invited to produce their own video artworks, and the project aimed to enable the students to use art to explore their own interests, feelings, and opinions. No theme was assigned, and instead students were encouraged to think about what they wanted to communicate.

Michael had been interested in photography and music, but was completely unfamiliar with the idea of video art before taking part in the **enquire** project, organised by ISIS Arts.

Immediately, he saw the potential to weave these interests together through the moving image, but was unsure about his ideas. Kelly Richardson, the artist working with the group, gave him the confidence to experiment, and reassured him that all artists produce 'unsuccessful' pieces – and that these are essential to development.

He went on to produce two video artworks during the project and, as he put it, opened the "new door" of video art. Through **enquire** Michael took the first steps to developing his own practice, and since completing the project has gone from strength to strength.

He bought his own video camera and produced a series of pieces which he continues to publish on his MySpace site, combining video artwork with experimental music.

Michael's video art work has since been shown at the Hexham Film Festival, and he has enrolled on a GNVQ course in media studies.



Demmi Anne's story

Demmi Anne was in Year 7 at Causeway School, and took part in a Towner Art Gallery projects, *Questions in the Air*.

The project explored communication and questioning, and encouraged participants to explore their own learning and performance, and actively apply research.

The History teacher working with Demmi Anne's group enjoyed the opportunity to be experimental and challenging, developing his relationship with the students, encouraging the artist to push the pupils in their creative thinking, allowing pupils to be individual and expressive, and empowering everybody to "bend the rules".

This was a new experience for Demmi Anne, who at times finds concentrating difficult and can behave aggressively. In session one, she was disruptive and attention-seeking, and said she thought art was "shit".

Then something clicked.

In session two, she began to ask questions and worked together with her peers with real interest. As the project progressed, so did Demmi Anne. She played a leading role in the development of a written story – a great personal achievement as she finds reading and writing difficult.

She actively engaged in group discussions, encouraged others to take part – and took responsibility for, and pride in, the work.

And she was not alone. Matthew, a pupil who had often been sent out of the class, actually sent *himself* to a quiet corner when he felt he was being disruptive. He did not want to be sent out of the session, or to disrupt it for others. The project meant that much to him.

In fact, the school reported distinct behavioural change in many of the pupils who took part. They felt respected within the gallery, and chose to return that respect.

enquire is finding that, given space and time to form their questions, young people respond in a mature, reflective way – often significantly different to their usual response – and show self-awareness and "self-governance", setting their own parameters and ground rules. Through these projects, they have grown in many different ways.