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alive – an introduction

Lorna Smith

'I felt challenged to produce an "alive" drawing rather than a life drawing.'

As an initial reaction, *alive* may seem like a simplistic and somewhat obvious title to accompany an exhibition of life drawings. However, the achievement of this 'living' quality on paper is far from simplistic and so remote from what is obvious that it has challenged each of the thousands of pupils who have participated in the Outreach project.

alive describes what is breathing, feeling, thinking, moving, hurting, relaxing. *alive* describes what is seen and unseen. It is a journey through sometimes familiar territory to discover the unexpected, a journey that takes participants far beyond the surface of the paper and the desire to make attractive images. As with any expedition there is the unfamiliar, an element of surprise. During the early stages of a workshop we all feel a certain amount of apprehension and exposure. The artists and models are fully aware that the success of the day rests upon the group's cooperation and willingness to get involved.

The Outreach teams travel to both secondary and primary schools throughout Great Britain, presenting day-long drawing workshops to groups of students. At the outset of each day, with each new group, it is made clear that the aim is to share a wide range of ideas about drawing, to complement GCSE and A-level coursework and to strengthen self-awareness and individual performance. The workshop is by nature experimental, open-ended, non-judgemental, and an experience that challenges students' current perceptions of the world around them, as well as their approach to life drawing.

A key objective of the Outreach programme is to encourage students to question and to construct new ideas. This process broadens their range of perceptions and raises issues in their minds such as, 'Is this what I see?' or, 'Are there different ways of seeing?' The development of curiosity is an essential part of education



Nicola Gresley
Colchester County
High School, Essex

'Once the mind has been expanded, it cannot go back to its original dimensions.'

Chris Carter
Treorchy Comprehensive
Mid-Glamorgan



since it benefits all areas of human activity and helps to prepare the young person for an independent life. Our task is to open up avenues of investigation, to prevent students from rushing to immediate conclusions and to generate interested minds in the process.

The human form is at the heart of our investigation, and drawing is the channel through which we seek out new meanings. As with any form of problem-solving, the mind has to invent, take risks, consider the alternatives and be prepared to learn from failure along the way.

Everyone has the ability to think creatively in some kind of activity, providing the conditions are right and the support is there. The workshop creates an environment where students can value original thought, free from competition, routine, and time limitations. The school hall, draughty gymnasium, drama studio, or art room is transformed into a studio space and gallery, in which we

can treat the students as artists for the day. The dust and momentum build as the minutes tick by.

The tutor and the model initiate a stream of exercises, making no apology for the fact that it is hard work. Art can be seen as the 'soft' option on the timetable, but take one look at the effort etched on these young faces and their mental and physical exhaustion at the end of the day and you will see plenty of evidence to the contrary. Freedom may be one component of creative expression, but so are persistence, discipline, skill and resilience.

For many who take part, the workshop will be an introduction to life drawing, and this in itself is a learning experience. Once the initial shock and the embarrassed giggles have died down (which takes seconds), the accepting nature of a group can be astonishing. By lunchtime, you would think these young people had been drawing the nude figure for most of their lives. From my

imagination



James Ockenden
Dorothy Stringer School, Brighton



'I would like to be able to look deeper into the subject rather than just the surface.'

Thomas Jules-Stock
Brays Grove School

perspective as a model this is a beneficial development, particularly since the distance between them and me can often be measured in inches. The interaction between student and model can influence levels of commitment. I can be seen as a head, two arms two legs and a body, analytically rather like a maths equation, or equally in a more subjective way as someone unique, with a personality and a body that is very much alive. The fact that I talk and lead certain key exercises is a revelation that shatters many preconceptions about the role of the model.

Frequently, students comment that the workshop was not what they expected. For example, the model does not remain in one position for several hours. The drawing exercises demand mental and physical agility. It is a juggling act between the internal process of looking, feeling and making decisions, and the external act of

placing and relating marks on paper. The students are required to heighten their instincts and senses in order to capture the essence of the living being before them.

Just as the artists work hard at inspiring the students through communicating concepts about drawing, the models work hard at communicating the dynamics of the human form through body language. The flexibility of the charcoal, and the varying time limits of each exercise allow the students to experience the unpredictable aspects of making. In such an environment, it may be pointed out to the students that we are not setting up a still-life project. We do not know what it is like to be a bowl of fruit, or what it feels like to be a chair. However, the connection that exists between two human beings, that inherent understanding of what it means to be alive, has the potential to create a unique learning opportunity. Once the students are aware of this dimension, they allow

form



Charlotte Lewins
Sir William Borlases School

'In art I can learn how to learn and not how to be taught.'



Victoria Ravfi
Highfield School, Herts.

themselves more freedom to explore breathing 'life' into their life drawings.

Although the model is the magnet to which they are drawn, there are many moments when the model will be out of sight. Stories are told, poems will be read, games may be played, time allocated to discussion and reflection. These moments, while punctuating the pace, allow the students to take stock and sift through their thoughts. Similarly, they demonstrate the many ways in which one subject can be explored, incorporating all the senses and so broadening the viewpoint.

There will always be individuals who have difficulties with these ideas. Fourteen- to eighteen-year-old students studying art have tested and tasted a great deal during their schooling to make discoveries of their own, and can guard fiercely their adopted style of drawing and painting. Some students want to use a pencil, others prefer to use

an easel rather than working on the floor, and there are those who feel daunted at the prospect of filling a large sheet of paper. The Outreach teams stress that all the workshop ideas are 'food for thought' and that ours is only one approach to life drawing that should be considered in relation to their regular coursework and other artistic experiences. Equally, we want students to enjoy and value the day, and this is something that we can never force.

How do we assess the work produced by students attending an Outreach workshop? Perhaps the act of making should not be judged solely by the resulting object, but should also consider the learning experience that has taken place within the creator. Unfortunately we cannot exhibit the students as well. Nor can we exhibit the smells, the noise, the workshop conversations or the many varied projects and exhibitions that occur in different schools as a result of the Outreach experience.

interpretation



Natalie Burns-Spence
Notting Hill & Ealing High School for Girls, Ealing



Rachel Turner
Colchester County High School for Girls, Essex

'In one part of the workshop we switched very quickly from one very energetic piece to a very relaxed one. The mood of the whole group, while I was doing these, strongly influenced my work.'

Just as no two workshops are the same, no two students are the same. The *alive* exhibition shows some of these unique qualities and displays a range of personal interpretations of the human form. Not all the exhibited drawings are 'finished' or selected because they appeared to be the strongest. They are included because they display a variety of approaches to dealing with the challenges of the day. The charcoal, a burnt stick of wood, and paper, compressed wood, have become something more due to the thoughtful control and manipulation of their users. These drawings communicate intense observations and interpretations as well as moments of energy, inventiveness, questioning and play. They symbolise the powerful role that art can play in the educational curriculum as well as in our lives.

environment



Julia Worley
Portsmouth High School, Southsea, Hants.