The Art of Community Engagement
Projects by Fine Art students at the University of Chichester

**Introduction**

The area of public and socially engaged art and the concept of collaboration between artist and community, has evolved to encompass a vast range of art practices, contexts and outcomes. In the Fine Art Department at the University of Chichester we have begun to explore the positive and mutually beneficial relationships that can occur between students and members of the public when they are able to work together effectively.

The definition of the word ‘community’ in this context is broad and encompasses:
- The student community
- The community of the school, hospital or other organisation engaged in the collaboration
- The wider community: people who come into contact with the art works as the audience at an exhibition or seeing commissioned art work in a public space

**Process**

The level 5 students who embarked upon these projects had already made significant steps in defining their visual language, working on individual projects in the studio. With these external projects students were asked to consider site and context and to explore collaborative working, testing their visual language, working on individual projects in the studio.

With these external projects the student was able to work together effectively.

The benefits of these projects have been numerous.

For students:
- sharing their practical Fine Art skills, for example in working with school children. Many found this straightforward enjoyment of process and materials to be a liberating experience. For some, this interaction with others led directly to developments in their studio practice and a heightened awareness of context.
- an unanticipated, but tangible, result of these interactions has been the increase in all-round confidence and for some students after participation in external projects. Many felt that they had improved their communication skills.
- vocational experience

The Regis School in Bognor Regis, to create an artwork for the foyer of the newly built school.

The wider community: people who come into contact with the art works as the audience at an exhibition or seeing commissioned art work in a public space

For community participants:
- participating in the projects resulted in numerous benefits, providing partnerships, mentoring, skills development and an opportunity for self-expression. Many also gained a better understanding of the artist’s role and the contexts in which art can be used.
- a sense of validation from seeing work in public venues

The benefits of the project are still ongoing. It has changed how I think about art, society, SEN and values – huge things. It has had a significant impact on my practice and I always seek to make art that is positive and inclusive. It has really clarified this for me.

Tanya Wood, level 5 student

**Results**

“Community is the starting point for new modes of relatedness, in which the paradigm of social conscience replaces that of the individual genius... art, which speaks to the power of connectedness and establishes bonds, art that calls us into relationship.”

Suzi Gable, The Reenchantment of Art, 1991

References

Gable, S. The Reenchantment of Art Themes and Hudson 1991

Starcic, R. Arts in health: a review of medical literature Arts Council England, 2004

Sources and acknowledgements

Quotations from University of Chichester students and staff at partner organisations, taken from interviews by Rachel Johnston, July 2012. Thanks to students Tanya Wood and Alison Stewart, Suzanne Griffiths at Glenwood School, Glenni Le Poulaven at St Wilfrid’s Hospice, Alana Dima Bighouse: 'Arts in Health’ NPT report for University of Chichester, 2011, for quotation from Chris Whittington and Eileen Maspero.

For further information, email: R.Johnston@chi.ac.uk