

# The Art of Community Engagement

Projects by Fine Art students at the University of Chichester

*"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 Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art*, 1991

## 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

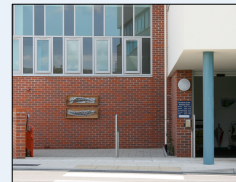
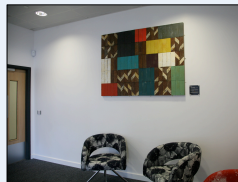
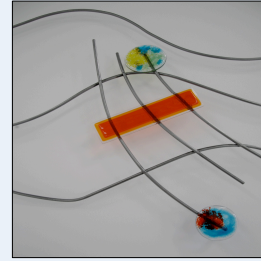
The level 5 students who embarked upon these projects had already made significant steps in defining their visual language, working on individual projects in the studio. With these external projects students were asked to consider site and context and to explore collaborative working, testing their skills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

The aim of these projects has been to:

- develop positive, ongoing relationships with the local community
- give students practical experience of working with others and a critical overview of the context of socially engaged art practice
- allow students to gain vocational experience as well as having an opportunity to test their skills and reconsider their artistic values.
- share skills and knowledge with the wider community

The students worked in a wide variety of contexts, including:

- St Richard's, Hospital, Chichester, working with staff and patients to develop commissioned art works for the Neurological Rehabilitation Unit and Cancer Treatment Centres.
- St Wilfred's Hospice, Chichester, working with patients and staff at drop-in sessions to develop art work for the foyer and café area of the day hospice.
- Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, students worked on the community programme to support staff in the day-to-day running of the Pallant Press and the 'Outside In' project, also mentoring and sharing a creative relationship with individual participants on the Partners in Art scheme.
- The Otter Gallery and St Anthony's School, visits to the Otter Gallery from the SEN school were organised and pupils responded to works from the current exhibition.
- Glenwood School, Emsworth, students worked with artist and senior lecturer Shirley Chubb and SEN pupils to produce two exhibitions and a sculptural art work in the school grounds.
- University of Chichester Chapel, students worked with chaplain John Dane to produce art works for the main chapel and the prayer room.
- March School, Chichester, students worked with the entire school community to produce a large mosaic for a newly developed area of the school building.
- The Regis School in Bognor Regis, to create an artwork for the foyer of the newly built school.



*"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

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

*"I felt that it expanded my talking skills – having to get up and talk to the class helped me develop my confidence."* Alison Stewart, level 5 student working at Glenwood School

*"The collaboration between us and Donald Wilson House, made us aware of the importance of working alongside others, taking into account their views, criticisms and aspirations and preferences, as well as being able to present our ideas in a professional way"* Chris Whittington and Eileen Maspero, level 5 students who completed a commission for St Richard's Hospital, Chichester

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 showing work in public venues

*"The children have encountered art in a new way, it has developed their approach and appreciation of what art can be. All of them have benefitted socially from the project, becoming more confident about communicating with strangers. This was the most important outcome for children, the big boost to confidence building."* Tanya Wood, level 5 student working at Glenwood School

*"Patients love to work with younger people and to tell their story to younger people because they're not here with their own agenda. That multi-generational interaction helps to raise awareness of hospices and to dispel many of the myths around them... The future of hospices is in opening up to the community, not remaining behind closed doors."*

Glenys LePoidevin, Day Hospice Lead, St Wilfred's Hospice, Chichester

*"The children loved going to the University and seeing their work displayed there, shown in the same place that the students show their work and seen by members of the community...Most of the pupils are quite aware of their SEN and it really helped them to see that they can achieve something [with their artwork] and for it to be put in a public place where others will appreciate it and comment favourably on it. It was a great boost to their self-esteem"* Suzanne Griffiths, Art Teacher, Glenwood School

For the wider community:

- commissioned art works, developed through discussion with the community, provide an ongoing focal point for those working in an environment. They engage the general public in a dialogue with contemporary art practice and provide a welcome distraction for patients in healthcare environments.
- where art work has been exhibited in public venues, for example by SEN pupils, it was felt that this had a potential benefit in terms of increasing visibility and dispelling prejudice.

*"The benefits of including art work in hospital environments, for both patients and staff, have been recorded in a number of studies:*

*Patients: arts interventions have been shown to increase the perception of comfort, to reduce the levels of cortisol (a hormonal indicator of stress), and to significantly control blood pressure levels.*

*Staff: introducing nursing students to the fine arts, shows that the arts increase awareness in dealing with illness and bereavement, as well as strengthening students' confidence in their own practice"*

Dr R. L. Staricoff, *Arts in health: a review of the medical literature*, Arts Council England, 2004

## References

Gablik, S	The Reenchantment of Art	Thames and Hudson	1991
Staricoff, R	Arts in health: a review of medical literature	ACE	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, Glenys Le Poidevin at St Wilfred's Hospice. Also Diana Brighouse: 'Arts in Health' KTP report for University of Chichester, 2011, for quotation from Chris Whittington and Eileen Maspero.

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Images from St Richard's Hospital, Chichester, Glenwood School pupils (Tanya Wood, Alison Stewart), The March School and the Regis School