Review of West Cork Arts Centre's Primary School Classroom-based Programme 2010-11

Phase One - Autumn 2010

Outline

This autumn the programme took on 9 groups (and three special needs groups reviewed separately). Each group visited the gallery for a full school day to visit the exhibition fastforwardfossil part 3 by Ellen Driscoll, allowing for travel times this meant 3 hours for Infant classes and 4 hours for older groups. To support the progression of the project following on from the visit an educational guide was posted on the website, and each teacher met with the facilitating artist after the gallery visit to plan a project outline.



Drawing by pupils from Abbeystrewery National School

Registration

Schools engaged with the programme through two avenues. Initially we had developed a list of interested schools based on a mail-out to our own mailing list at the end of the summer term. A WCEC mailout at the beginning of the autumn term then invited teachers to a meeting there regarding the programme. The selected schools originated both from the initial list and from the WCEC meeting. Five schools had to be disappointed altogether as well as another 3 or 4 who had decided to wait for next year of their own volition. Within the participating schools there were also other classes interested in taking part that could not.

The final list included a wide geographic spread (Eyeries to Clonakilty) a mix of big and school smalls and a mix of ages. The only anomaly was that less of the older groups applied, with the largest age group looking for places being 2nd class.

Gallery visits

Those teachers who had participated previously commented that the longer day spent at WCAC was much more beneficial, despite initial concerns from the young groups that the day might be too long. I would agree that three hours is enough for those up to 1st class and possibly 2nd class. One of the 1st/2nd groups came for a 3 hour slot (they had a long way to travel) and this was fine, a second 1st/2nd class group came for a 4 hour slot and there attention had definitely waned by the last hour.

From my point of view as facilitator the longer session was a much better way to work. The day was dedicated to working with one group, the tour and activities did not need to be rushed but could be built upon, introducing ideas more gradually and discussing work more fully.

The day would begin with the gallery tour, looking at and discussing the exhibition a room at a time. This engagement with the artwork would last for the best part of an hour (slightly shorter with some groups). Most schools then took a short snack break and came back into the gallery to spend 20 – 30 minutes drawing in the gallery, then returning to the workspace to develop these drawings into big group drawings that explored approaches taken by the exhibition artist (turning the page, sticking pages together to create larger work, adding from the imagination, spilling paint etc). This would usually take us up to a twenty minute lunch break.



water and boats plastic sculpture by pupils from St James NS, Durrus

Infant groups would then go straight into exploring plastic (the material used for the sculpture by the artist). Plastic bottles had already been cut in half to make it easier for the children to work with. Infants were encouraged to think about the themes of the exhibition but without restriction they were encouraged to see what they could do with the plastic, using scissors and sellotape and adding to them with oil pastels after. They also drew pictures on small pre-cut squares of plastic exploring the journey of the milk in the bottles from cow to breakfast tables. These were strung together to create a quilt by the facilitator after the session and returned to the school.

Older groups developed ideas surrounding mankind's affect on the natural landscape. Beginning with collaging paper (recycled materials where available) they created natural landscapes from flat shapes (based on the 'drop' shapes the artist used to create the watery base of her sculpture). Working in groups each group explored a different type of landscape, jungle, forest, sea, rivers, hillsides, fields, the sky etc.

Once these were complete they began to work with the plastic and were able to achieve more than the younger groups with specific ideas and direction in mind. Still considering the particular type of landscape their group had created, they were asked to develop this flat base or background into a three dimensional sculpture using the plastic to create ways in which mankind has affected the landscape eg. buildings, roads, forms of transport etc

These were then arranged, along with the rest of what their group had made, on top of or in front of their paper collage background, forming their own mini installation. Some of these were very successful, others less so, but the process of working with the plastic was very interesting for them. It was also commented on by teachers as having great benefit in terms of the investigation going on, and the problem solving required by an exercise in which they were not given directions on how to make something but instead provided with the material and allowed to explore to see what they could do with it.

Teachers meetings

These have been an extremely successful addition to the programme. Although difficult to arrange and needing a travel budget (for many teachers it is completely impractical to travel in to us for the meeting) the effort put in has been well worth it. I met with each teacher for approximately an hour, beginning by asking the teacher to outline what areas of the exhibition and workshops the class had particularly enjoyed or found interesting and if there was a particular area the teacher would like to explore further. I also explained the importance of allowing time for exploring ideas with the groups rather than visualising an end product at this point, and that the exhibition need only be a starting point for developing their own ideas in their own direction.

From these conversations a different project emerged with each teacher and each teacher went away with a clear idea of how they could continue with the group, and some ideas to try out. As facilitator I had a clear idea of what direction the school was taking and will be better placed to plan workshops relevant to them for the school visits after Christmas.

As Tess pointed out, the teachers were also very pleased to get new ideas for the classroom that they could deliver themselves. For Tess, working with special needs groups, it also gave her an opportunity to find out about the needs of the individual students, and the best ways to work with them.



Pupils from Eyeries NS looking at Ellen Driscoll's work in the gallery Image by Roland Paschoff

West Cork Education Centre

As well as helping with the initial registration of teachers for the project, WCEC also provided the opportunity to run further workshops for teachers. A Looking and Responding Course, although separate to the main programme worked with the same exhibition and provided an opportunity to publicise awareness of the programme, and the importance of looking at actual artwork with children, to other teachers who may be interested in the future. The initial session in the gallery was well attended, the second session, about working with online resources in WCEC, was not well attended when initially we had felt that this would be the more popular.

Even more important was a course for SNA's, both those involved with the programme and outside of it. This was invaluable for Tess in addressing some of the ongoing problems she has had with bringing understanding of her ways of working to all the adults in the room. This workshop had to be repeated as the demand was so high, and will be used again in following years.

Education Guide

This proved to be a both effective and cost effective way to provide teachers with further information and support in the classroom. Many teachers have interactive whiteboards in the classroom and could bring up the images and ideas presented there to refresh the group's memory of their visit when discussing plans for their own project. It was also a useful tool for the two teachers who joined the programme late to catch up on what the group had seen but they had not (see below).

The second Guide based on the *Cutters / Cork* exhibition allowed groups to see collage work without visiting the gallery for a second time, and could be used by the facilitators to introduce the idea of using collage into the project during the school visits.

Phase Two- Spring 2011

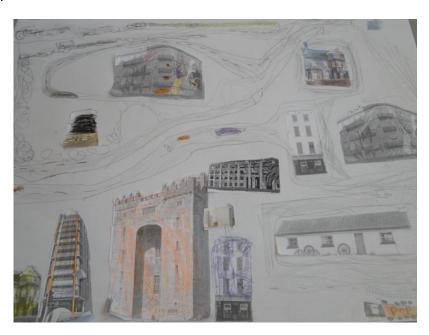
Outline

All the schools involved in Autumn 2010 continued with the project into Spring 2011, receiving 2 workshops in the school, with the first aimed at developing their ideas for the project and the second more specifically aimed at supporting the production of work for the exhibition.

Schools workshops

The initial school visits took place in January and February, with the follow up visits in February or March.

Two groups changed teachers over the Christmas break and this concerned me somewhat. With the first group, from St Mary's Rosscarbery, it was planned, in that the teacher was retiring – had I known this before registering them for the programme they would probably have not been selected as it broke the continuity of the programme. I did not meet with the teacher before the Christmas as I thought it made more sense to wait and make a plan with the new teacher. Unfortunately the new teacher was not very committed to the programme. I visited them early in January to get them started but as I had not had the teacher meeting beforehand I had to bring a generic workshop to the group rather than one tailored to their own ideas. The teacher then spent only ten minutes talking to me after this visit. She was clearly itching to get away and I barely had time to outline the project expectations to her fully, however we had come up with a theme for the group and she was happy to continue. When I contacted them for a second visit I was told they didn't need it, they had already made their piece for the exhibition. I left it at this.



Collage and drawing by infants, Knockskeagh NS, during school workshop

The second was unplanned and unavoidable, in that the teacher from St Joseph's NS broke her leg over the Christmas. I had met with her shortly beforehand and was very impressed with her

enthusiasm and ideas for the project. All the information was passed on to the replacement teacher and in contrast to he previous example he was very committed and interested in the project, developing the ideas of the original teacher in his own direction with the group.

Each workshop had to be developed individually, as each school had taken on a specific project idea linked to the initial exhibition, as well as being with different age groups. Most ideas developed around the impact of humans on the landscape through the built environment, industry or travel.

Infants groups explored farming and buildings.

- 1st 2nd classes explored flight, standing stones and stone walls, and a new school building
- 3rd 4th classes explored space, travel, and local industry
- $5^{th}-6^{th}$ classes explored imports and exports across the world

Most groups took on the idea of using recycled materials in one way or another- plastic bottles, cardboard, papier-mâché, fabric and other materials.

Having two visits to the schools allowed time for exploring and experimenting with the groups. Most groups used the first visit as an opportunity to either try out a technique or develop ideas around their theme. For example a second class group wanted to work with papier-mâché, and had quite a fixed idea of what they wanted to do for exhibition. For the first workshop we tried out papier-mâché and they found it was harder to do, and less effective than they had thought so subsequently changed their approach. Another group, exploring the cotton industry, made pictures using natural dyes on recycled cotton during their first session, this was very successful and tied into their work looking at imports and exports as the dyes were either local produce (eg. blackberries) or imported goods (eg. teabags), but was not used in their final piece for exhibition.

Having a second input from the gallery through the Cutters / Cork Exhibition Education Guide was also useful in that it gave an extra impetus for what direction to take with workshops where the groups were unsure what approach to take. I feel it gave the project a wider scope in the eyes of the teachers and pupils, in that often they feel they have to stay quite specifically linked to the original exhibition in terms of materials and technique. Providing them with an alternative approach to 'recycling' materials widened their horizons for the project, without losing track of the main thread.

Exhibition

This year's exhibition really showed the difference in this year's approach to the programme. Firstly the smaller number of groups meant there did not have to be the confines of a specific size restriction, allowing many groups to develop ideas that were more installation based, considering the display of the work and how it would work in the gallery. This could particularly be seen in the work from St Joseph's NS who used gallery 3 to create an installation of lit recycled plastic sculptures in a darkened space. The work of Eyeries NS was also very considered in terms of display within the space. Unfortunately however, it was not ready in time for the exhibition and instead was displayed at the school in their own event in June 2011. I attended the event, which was a celebration of the work done and involved all the parents of the children involved and the other children and teachers in the school.

The most disappointing work came from St Mary's Rosscarbery. As this was the group who had changed teacher and not taken part in a teacher's meeting or second workshop, this was not a surprise.

Asking the groups to provide artists statements for the work also helped to increase the understanding of the gallery visitor of the full project and the thought and ideas that had gone into the work. Each could be seen its own context rather than simply as work in response to Ellen Driscoll's exhibition.

For those that visited the exhibition with their school groups, it was a rewarding experience both in terms of the pride of seeing their own work in the gallery and seeing the variety of work that other groups had created and the ideas they had pursued starting from the same point.



St Joseph's NS installation for children's exhibition, detail

Conclusion

The new direction for the programme has definitely resulted in a higher quality of experience for the participants, development in skills for teachers and SNA's and quality of the exhibition. This needs to be built upon next year through emphasising the importance of the artist facilitator's relationship with the individual teacher and the benefit to the group that can result from a full commitment to the project. The profile of the programme amongst local schools needs to be maintained in order to ensure the demand from teachers from a variety of schools remains high to counteract the effect that the loss of regular annual participation may have to schools applying each year.

Recommendations for 2011-12 Registration, selection and planning

- Important to fully communicate with the individual teacher signing up for the programme before allocating the place to ensure commitment
- Work with WCEC again to broaden the field from which to select groups
- Look to include at least two brand new schools to the programme
- Look at special needs allocation 2 rather than 3 out of the twelve would be more balanced
- Consider drawing up a contract for teachers so they are fully aware of what they are agreeing to
- Ensure direct contact details for individual teachers available and work on developing individual relationships that are open and direct

Delivery

- Gallery workshops and education guide in the autumn as before
- Ensure all teachers met before Christmas break to plan projects consult teachers on content and approaches to be covered
- Book timeframe for two workshops in schools ahead of time if possible to allow more forward planning of workload
- Look to bring in new influence after Christmas as with Cutters in 2011, be aware of this ahead of time
- Tess has suggested incorporating sound and music to the work with he SNA's
- Develop longer course with WCEC for SNA's
- Develop the idea of collaborative practice for SNA's

Exhibition

- Encourage schools to consider the gallery space and the installation of their work
- Encourage the development of artists statements possibly in second workshop
- Encourage visits from the schools to the final exhibition possibly offer something for when they arrive