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Hands-on, Mind-on

Introduction

‘Volunteering is essential to creating an inclusive and mutually supportive society.’

(Speakman, Drake, Hawkins, no date)

Through volunteering new communities are formed, local communities are enriched and the community of volunteers are empowered by putting into practice their learning.

Crafting the Community is a volunteering project which promotes and delivers textile craft activities to the University of Huddersfield’s wider community, predominantly those of Kirklees and Calderdale. The project was initiated in 2002 as a result of gaining 3 year funding of £13,500 from the Higher Education Active Community Fund (HEACF), after a gap in funding of two years, further funding of £13,000 was gained from the University of Huddersfield in 2007 this funding will end in July 2010. The projects longevity and survival in the ever changing funding climate is testament to the clear benefits Crafting the Community has brought to the teaching and learning environment on the BA (Hons) Textile Crafts degree, enabling students to place their learning within a professional context, see figure 1.



Figure 1. Folk Art exhibition Bankfield Museum Halifax, Student curators

Volunteering can:

‘Foster a ‘can-do’ culture of entrepreneurship, student led volunteering is empowering. It allows avenues to be explored or ideas to be initiated that might not be accessible through paid work.’ (Speakman, Drake, Hawkins, no date)

The first phase of Crafting the Community succeeded beyond expectations it had been included in the University UK’s report ‘From the Margins to the Mainstream’ and the volunteering work achieved to support the International touring exhibition ‘Through the Surface’ had been recognised through the HEACF Volunteering awards. It had also become a USP of Textile Crafts at Huddersfield.

A second round of funding made it necessary to re-evaluate the aims of the project; a clear requirement was to employ a project co-ordinator. We also wanted to expand our group of community partners, grow the range of staff involved in running the project and reflect where possible developing issues within textiles such as recycling and sustainability. A set of clear aims were developed to help focus and extend the work:

- Increase awareness of arts and crafts
- Engage diverse community groups into developing craft skills
- Raise awareness of environmental and social responsibility
- Develop skills and knowledge of community partners
- Enhance life skills and knowledge for those participating
- Help to engage the wider community in major arts events across the region
- Extend awareness of art and design as a possible career route

Crafting the Community has created over 100 individual student volunteers, 5 staff volunteers working across more than 20 projects for over 15 community Partners, it has some parallels with projects such as ‘Creativity Matters’ which;

'Promotes the creative capacity of children, increases the children's and community's access and engagement in the arts, whilst providing high-quality participatory arts and promoting children's cultural citizenship' Bamford (2008)

Using a case study approach I aim to articulate some of the key benefits volunteering has brought to the course, volunteers and community.

Case studies

Through the Surface

Crafting the Community I, developed a number of significant partners, in particular June Hill the then Textile Curator for Calderdale Museums and Galleries. The project was approached by June to support the Halifax leg of 'Through the Surface', which was a groundbreaking exhibition that celebrated cultural exchange and collaboration between Britain and Japan through the working methods of textile artists in creative partnerships. The exhibition would attract national as well as local interest; the work would be both challenging and thought-provoking.

The scope for the exhibition was enormous, with an opportunity for works to be exhibited in iconic buildings from Halifax's textile past such as Bankfield Museum, Piece Hall and a unmanned venue called the Square Chapel. The latter provided unique site specific opportunities for the textile installation by Fabrica.

The major problem would be how to run, install and invigilate such an exhibition, for a museums service with a very limited resource. The volunteer's specialist knowledge would be the key to making the work accessible to as many people as possible and to make manning three venues a viable reality. We could all see the potential to create something quite spectacular and realised that to make this happen a unique approach needed to be fostered.

The Textile Crafts course had already hosted the collaboration between Jeanette Appleton and Naoko Yoshimoto for Through the Surface, involvement by Crafting the Community volunteers in the tour seemed like a further insight into this exhibition that could fundamentally enhance the student learning experience.

With all complex projects you acknowledge the real risk that you take in assuming that your students will share your enthusiasm, you rely on them putting aside the need to sustain their finances through paid work and recognise the value of the opportunity you put before them. You as the organiser hope that the experience will live up to the students' expectations, and that you as a project will live up to the partners; it is essentially a partnership of trust. Twenty two students committed to the project, some travelling back to Huddersfield from their homes in the far flung corners of Britain one working around her wedding, in order to participate in the ten week exhibition.

The project volunteers assisted in the installation and take down of the work, acted as invigilators and textile interpreters within the exhibition in conjunction with the galleries main staff. They led school & college tours of the exhibition explaining the techniques and contexts of the work. Several volunteers assisted in developing learning materials, and worked with families in workshop activities, see figure 2.



Figure 2. Student Joyce Thompson, installing work at the Square Chapel Halifax

The exhibition spaces had to be manned at all times Bankfield Museum and Piece Hall had permanent salaried staff but the Square Chapel had opened only for this event and was solely manned by students. The volunteers had to sit for up to eight hours each day, a particularly challenging environment, the students sat in a blacked out room with very limited lighting, reflecting onto the textile installation accompanied by a musical composition by Edward Dudley Hughes. Student's spoke of the relief of visitors arriving and the opportunity for them to discuss the piece the students understandably found this challenging, but showed real initiative reorganising the manning of venues so that no one solely invigilated at this venue and therefore sharing the strain. The volunteers were

surprised that they were able to make a difference by interpreting work for the visitors, they had all received a briefing tour with Lesley Millar prior to the launch, see figure 3.



Figure 3. Lesley Millar briefing students prior to the private view for Through the Surface at Halifax.

One of the biggest achievements students commented on was their ability to discuss the work drawing on their own implicit knowledge of textiles and the making process.

'I gained enormously from the experience of discussing the works, it made me realise how much I had learnt on my course, it really gave me confidence.'

'The audience was from all over Britain and we needed to talk to all types of people from academics and enthusiasts to school children and families. We had to find different ways to answer their questions.'

For many this was an authoritative moment, a subtle moment of understanding, where their depth of knowledge became explicit, and a moment of enlightenment.

Outcomes

The project delivered an insight into Textile Art which would otherwise have been unavailable for the community. It underpinned educational activities in relation to the National Curriculum and promoted the idea of cultural exchange through the exhibition and workshops. It also gave the volunteers an in depth insight into working with a cross-section of the local community and access to textile artists of international renown

The project succeeded in showing that a major exhibition can be made more accessible to the general public by the support of knowledgeable well briefed volunteers.

Tapestry 08

Crafting the Community has worked with over ten schools and colleges since the projects inception the benefits to these groups are wide ranging and differ according to the contexts they operate in, all involve young artists and designers working alongside young people and sharing their passion for textiles as Emily Pringle describes it in her paper Artists perspectives in art practice and pedagogy.

‘The artist also promoted experiential learning with an emphasis on giving participants the opportunity to experiment, take risks and play within a supportive environment’ Pringle (2008)

In 2007 Crafting the Community was approached by the British Tapestry group to collaborate and support educational workshops with children and young people in order to create work for the exhibition ‘Education in Tapestry’. This exhibition would run alongside ‘Tapestry 08’ a newly formed International open exhibition supported by the Arts Council. Three specific age and gender groups were targeted to produce work for the exhibition Education in Tapestry:

- Two year 6 classes from a mixed rural Church of England Primary school.
- A group of 13- 14 year old boys from an urban Catholic School

- A group of students from the Textile Crafts course, some of whom specialised in tapestry.

The school groups were introduced to the principles of tapestry weaving each child was encouraged to design and make a tapestry sample for exhibition over a six week series of workshops the themes the children tackled extended ideas of citizenship and community. Emphasis was placed on the acquisition of new skills, creative engagement in practice and the rich experience that is gained by collective making.

The Year 6 classes explored recycling and reclaiming as a mechanism source material for their work. In collaboration with the class teachers a theme of emotions was chosen this linked in well to the children's' PHSE lessons, an observation by the project coordinator was that

'The process of weaving and making was used to extend the children's chosen emotion allowing them to explore their thoughts in a subconscious non confrontational environment'.

The squeezing out of creative making and thinking in schools due to the national curriculum and diminishing resources means that practice led learning opportunities are being lost as Dr. Aric Sigman describes

'Hands –on' exploration seems critical for the development of understanding and inventiveness. The use of hands seems central to intelligence and crucial to full cognitive learning.' Sigman (2008)

The teenage boys worked very much as a group and encouraged and enjoyed the process of communal making, they appeared to view the whole process as a team activity this can be seen clearly in some of the making stage images figure 4 , but also in the way the boys viewed their exhibition figure 5.



Figure 4. A group of boys from All Saints Catholic School Huddersfield, making tapestry samples.



Figure 5. The boys viewing their completed tapestry samples at 'Education in Tapestry' Dean Clough Gallery Halifax.

In the paper artists' perspectives on art practice and pedagogy Emily Pringle discusses t

'The development of learners' ideas and individual creativity, whilst encouraging them to reflect on their activities. The teaching of specific techniques or craft skills was perceived as important ,but necessary mainly to enable participants to realise their ideas more effectively in visual form' Pringle (2008)

In the paper 'Mixed messages or permissions and opportunities? Reflections on current policy perspectives on creativity in education the author's state':

'Creativity is clearly identified as a strand within a range of other government policies pertaining to formal and informal learning' Cochrane et al (2008)

There are a range of commitments from Early Years education through to the 14-19 Diploma, the work produced with our group of teenage boys was devised to raise awareness of Tapestry as a life enhancing activity or potential career, it clearly mirrors the Personal learning and thinking skills (PLTS)

‘This framework gives secondary schools permission to design teaching and learning processes placing creative thinking at the centre of their curriculum’
Cochrane et al (2008)

Volunteering Benefits Everyone

The benefits for the individuals and groups who have worked with our volunteers include:

- Re-engaging with a hobby long forgotten
- Sparking the first idea that University might be an achievable ambition, ‘the volunteers not being so unlike themselves’.
- Finding a positive focus within their life and a platform to express themselves creatively for the first time
- An essential point in the week to meet other people in similar situations
- Enhance life skills and knowledge
- Raising awareness of environmental and social responsibility through traditional craft skills

Community Partner Organisations:

- Engage diverse community groups into developing craft skills
- Develop skills and knowledge with community partners
- Develop networks for learning
- Help engage the wider community in major events across the region
- Support non-core education syllabus through workshops, provide inset training for teachers and provide potential new career paths for those seeking to change careers and develop new skills

The Volunteers:

- Working with a broad spectrum of people across all age groups
- Developing transferable skills such as teamwork, leadership, problem-solving and communication

- Practice based experience across a wide range of careers
- Working in unknown territory, going outside their comfort zone
- Developing professional networks for the volunteers in order to support their own practice on graduation

Conclusions

Volunteering has major benefits to society, it promotes community and citizenship. It is very rewarding for those that engage in it but it also requires energy, commitment and a certain amount of risk taking on the part of the volunteers to work in new and sometimes challenging situations and environments.

The staff team on Crafting the Community have worked hard to embed volunteering into the ethos of the Textile Crafts course in order to sustain the project beyond funding rounds. Each project has to be devised to fit specifically to the needs of the community partner a one size fits all model doesn't work, hard lessons have been learnt in terms of not taking on too many activities, realistic timing of projects and the number of volunteers participating.

Practice based volunteering removes barriers to learning and begins dialogue.

'Most human beings find learning easiest when they begin a learning experience with a hands-on, mind-on activity. At nearly all stages of life, one learns a great deal about our environment (objects, another person, etc) via our universal preference "to touch learn" more about an object.' (Sigman, 2008)

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