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Artist Bank: Not just kids' stuff

Rachel Attfield, Creative Projects Manager and **Katherine Duhigg**, Creative Projects Coordinator, ask how can a creative project with primary school children impact on artists' professional practice?

The Autumn 2008 issue of *Animated* contained an article about Primary Bank, a pilot project that Siobhan Davies Dance had just completed. The article tracked the journey of the organisation's year-long project with our neighbouring primary school, Charlotte Sharman, London. In the evaluation of the project we highlighted a number of key factors that we believe are essential components to any choreographic project Siobhan Davies Dance delivers with primary school children.

These include how we translate conceptual creative ideas into tangible and relevant outcomes for the children and how we, as project leaders, first find and then communicate the essence of these ideas for children to explore, question and discuss. We came to realise that through experiential and sensory exploration and tasks children can find their own ways of understanding an idea that is introduced, and then feel confident about discussing and questioning their discoveries. An important means of offering these sensory experiences in our projects is by involving artists from different disciplines such as visual art, film and sound to provide new ways of understanding and experiencing movement. It's also important for us to ensure that movement and creativity are at the centre of every session, and that each project should be artist-led.

With all this in mind we considered the importance and value of what the dance artists involved in these projects can learn from their experience of planning and delivering a project for primary school children, in partnership with artists from other art forms. This led us to pose the question, can an artist's professional practice be developed

through the delivery of a creative project with primary schools?

Artist Bank commenced in September 2009, and will continue until July 2010. This is a project in which the artists are at the heart of the development and delivery. Following a research and development period two teams of dance and visual artists - Catherine Bennett (dance artist) with Lucy Cash (film artist), and Pari Naderi (dance artist) with Ruth Gibson (visual artist) - began working in partnership to deliver a choreographic project over two terms. The reach of the project extends to over 270 Key Stage 2 children, 11 teachers in four schools from Lambeth and Southwark. Siobhan Davies has been integral in the selection of the artists, and is mentoring them throughout the project. 'I'm drawn to working with artists who've kept the excitement of working within their own medium like me,' she says. 'These are artists with a compulsion and rigour to continually explore their own form, but with the breadth and curiosity to register how the arts, sciences and human studies connect with movement.'

Now, at the half-way point of the project, we've paused to question the artists about their experiences so far. The areas the artists highlighted to be most significant to them at this juncture are:

- Communication and translation of conceptual ideas
- Using children's immediate responses to adapt their thinking or working
- Collaboration with an artist from a different art form.

All the artists agreed that communicating conceptual ideas in their art form has regularly challenged them, particularly >



Artist Bank: Charles Dickens Primary. Photo: Pari Naderi.



Above and centre: Artist Bank: Wyvil Primary. **Right:** Artist Bank: Charles Dickens Primary. All photos: Pari Naderi.

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because some of these ideas are so integral to their own professional practice. They’ve discovered a need for clarity in their communication and finding experiences that are relevant and significant to the children participating. The translation of a conceptual idea into a physical experience has been a fascinating process, and a valuable way of sharing the concepts they’re exploring.

‘We’ve been exploring the use of narrative to communicate ideas,’ says Catherine Bennett, ‘as this is something children tend to use in their life. It’s about finding a hook or a way in that has significance to them.’ For her part, says Pari Naderi, ‘I’ve always used very visual images and sensory ideas as a dancer, but now I’m learning to strip away the “waffle” and concentrate on the important stuff.’

Unlike a performance or exhibition where the audience’s response is not always direct or immediate, the artists acknowledge that children provide a very open and honest response to the creative ideas they’re sharing. This sometimes requires an ability to shift their thinking, and to find different ways of explaining or approaching an idea. As Lucy Cash admits, ‘To stand in front of a large group of young children who are so honest can be intimidating. They’re ruthless. But I value this honesty. It’s very different to creating a performance piece because you’re getting feedback about your ideas straight away.’

We’ve seen how effectively art forms can feed each other, and how this can lead to alternative ways of exploring choreography and movement. A very important aspect of the project for Siobhan Davies Dance and the artists

involved is the unique opportunity for a dance artist to work alongside a visually-based artist in planning and delivering the creative sessions. All the artists share an in-depth knowledge of movement, which gives them a common language from which to start their creative process. The partnerships they’ve formed provides them with an excellent support system within the new environment of a primary school.

‘The collaboration with film and visual artists provides a very rich experience for everyone,’ agrees Bennett. ‘It’s much richer than just starting from a pure movement idea.’ Why is that? ‘Because out of all art forms movement is probably the least tangible for children to understand how it can be developed, and how it can be taken to a different level. Collaborating with a visual artist has helped them to understand more complex movement ideas.’

The ongoing support offered to the artists is allowing them to challenge themselves, and to reflect on their own individual journeys. To assist in this process we’ve created an online discussion forum, Artist Bank Exchange, which provides a learning and communication tool that connects all the project participants. This allows everyone to share their thoughts, questions, feelings and discoveries online. As the project progresses we’ll continue to question and explore what the artists can gain from their creative involvement in a primary school project, and what legacy they’ll leave for the children and teachers with whom they’ve connected.

You’ll be able to find out about the artists and children’s progress through the project when the Artist Bank Exchange is made public on our website in September 2010. A dissemination of the project will take place in autumn 2010, when we’ll re-visit the question raised here.

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