



Sandwell Deaf Club

Contact:

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Artists:

Rich Franks and Keith Bloomfield

PRIMARY OUTCOME FOR SANDWELL DEAF CLUB:

Access communities in the Black Country

OTHER OUTCOMES FOR THE PROJECT:

Engage and involve participants in ongoing activity

Develop confidence among participants

Develop health and arts sector awareness of the value of using the arts to engage with communities

Sandwell Deaf Club is run by Sandwell Youth Service. The project was undertaken over five sessions with seven young people who meet regularly at the Yemini Centre in West Bromwich. Workshops took place approximately every two weeks, from 13th July – 23rd August 2009. The group was a mix of males and females and ages ranged from 13 to 18 years. All participants were deaf, some had learning difficulties and one girl had autism.

What is Happiness?

Attendance and Initial Response

The artists decided to meet the young people at one of their regular youth club nights, in order to try and understand the potential communication barriers that might be experienced. This also gave them the chance to assess what styles of work the young people liked, by showing them a series of art / design books and presentation material. Although the whole group said they would take part in the project, the artists said they found it difficult to judge at the beginning whether the group

were enthusiastic about the project or not. Even the Senior Youth Worker initially had some reservations about the group's willingness to take part at this stage. However he later said that he felt *"the group took to it well"*.

Using small maquettes of houses as an evaluation tool, the young people recorded comments such as:

"This is fantastic"
"good"
"I like drawing on the house, (using) colours and design".

The Process

After ascertaining what made the young people happy, both emotionally and in terms of hobbies and interests (in most cases the line between external and internal happiness were blurred), they then designed their houses as small maquettes. Each participant made their own house and the maquettes allowed them to experiment with colour, subject and style.

The Senior Youth Worker said he was impressed by the groups' concentration and enthusiasm and that there was *"a lot of positive engagement"* with the artists. The artists noted that two participants had quite limited communication skills and learning difficulties but coped very well due to one-to-one work by youth workers. A number of workstations were set up for participants and these were used well – a spray booth; block print and projection workstation, in order to use a variety of materials including stencils, spray paint, ink and posca (graffiti) pens. One participant particularly enjoyed the block print workstation with its emphasis on repetition, which developed her creativity and concentration levels. Others asked to take stencils home with them to carry on working on their designs at home. The artists noted that by this stage:

"There was a very focused atmosphere within the group, who had developed ownership of their artwork and so stayed on after the session had finished".

The artists said the whole process for them was a huge "learning curve". At first they found the workshops to be a challenge, as they had not



worked with a deaf group before. Communication was the greatest barrier, with no audio cues making it difficult to pick up whether people were enjoying or engaging with the workshops. To overcome this it was crucial that the line of communication with youth workers was strong and whenever possible they asked the participants what they felt on a one to one basis. Other problems included the nature of the space, limited art supplies, mess generated during sessions and different levels of ability within the group, which at times made workshops fragmented. Subsequently the artists devoted a lot more preparation time to later workshops:

"At this point we felt that the group and ourselves had made real progress with the project"

After a gap of four weeks, the last workshop was held at Multistory's office and creative space. The Senior Youth Worker said that there was a phenomenal amount of commitment from the young people to attend this and finish their houses, as they all made their own way there on the day, some travelling in from a distance.

The whole group attended the Happiness Exhibition launch at the Public. For some it was the first time

they had their work displayed anywhere, and many of them told the Senior Youth Worker they got a 'buzz' out of seeing other people look at their work. They also enjoyed the different perspective of other houses and seeing how the same template had been interpreted in a variety of ways.



Challenges

One young person in particular engaged with this process and developed incredibly strong ownership of her work, despite having autism. She developed very good concentration levels, a strong focus and clarity about the work, with clear ideas about what she wanted from it. The Senior Youth Worker admitted that he didn't think she would be interested in it, but from the first session she was *"in her element"* and he *"saw her in a different light altogether."*

The group was a very diverse one and the artists had to make sure they supplied 'something for everyone'. For example, older teenage boys would not ordinarily consider decorating 'Wendy Houses', however using stencilling, posca pens and things which interested them all helped to sell the concept.

Benefits



The Senior Youth Worker noted that the project had challenged the young people, yet importantly it had helped them identify skills they had, but were not aware of before now. The nature of the work and the artists' approach meant that the participants had the freedom to express themselves, make decisions and so felt valued. This group rarely engage in projects where an activity takes place over a number of weeks and results in an end product. He was therefore particularly impressed with the 'staying power' of the group and their determination to finish the houses - something he had not witnessed before.

Conclusion

The group had never used professional artists before, and The Senior Youth Worker saw the artform as particularly crucial, as the deaf world is naturally a visual one. He felt the approach was unique, and it has encouraged Sandwell Youth Service to consider more creative activities for the future:

“it was a strong tool which bonded the group, broke down barriers and helped communication ”.

