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A brush with creativity

Helena Aikin reveals how a challenging art project helped students with cerebral palsy to examine and express their identity



In May 2012, I was invited to teach an art workshop to people with cerebral palsy at CIRIAC, a special education day school in Guadalajara, Mexico. Many of the 30 students who signed up for the course were in wheelchairs and had severe motor and speech impairments. Their ages ranged from six to 30 and their individual needs differed greatly. None of them had any previous experience with art, having been considered too physically impaired to cope with artistic activities.

This was also my first time teaching art to people with cerebral palsy, so I decided to wait until I actually got to know the students a little before planning any activities. I was deeply touched by the enthusiasm they showed at the prospect of doing artwork. Realising how hard it was for many of them to express their emotions and ideas, I decided to do a rather challenging project with them: a

life-size self-portrait using their hands or other parts of their bodies along with a range of tools including brushes, sponges, paint, glue, fabric, magazine cut-outs, wool, string, beads, feathers and hair extensions. The idea was to give them the chance to experiment with different art materials and to portray themselves creatively. Students were encouraged to use their imagination and sense of humour to express their feelings, hopes and desires. The starting point was their body silhouette on a piece of cardboard in a position of their choice, which they could then fill in using the art materials available.

As there was no art room available, I turned the school garage into a temporary workshop where students came and went in groups of three or four. Luckily, I had the help of two assistants in charge of moving participants to the floor and helping them according to their mobility issues.

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Discovering identity

The students were delighted with my proposal and enjoyed the task immensely, even though it was quite demanding for many of them in terms of sustained physical effort and concentration. They all produced attractive and original artwork which, without being realistic portrayals, resembled them quite closely at a symbolic level.

As a follow-up activity, their language teachers invited the students to talk about their work and their experience in the workshop. In many instances, they had depicted themselves in their



Students responded well to physical challenges that some believed would be beyond them.

favourite place or doing an activity they really enjoy – or thought they might enjoy if they were able to do it. Even though they had access to attractive collage material, such as feathers or hair extensions, paint was definitely the most popular medium and some of them refused to use anything else, arguing that the rich tempera colours we were using allowed them to express their ideas and emotions best.



The opportunity for self-discovery was embraced by participants.

Although the atmosphere of the workshop was relaxing and playful, I believe that the participants were also working at a deeper level, as this task is usually an invitation to introspection and self-discovery. Interestingly, while the younger students were mostly concerned with confirming their identities – some of them even named their pictures using phrases like “this is me!” – the older ones talked mostly about their challenges and goals, which in some instances they depicted using different colours and textures.

The artwork resulting from the workshop was exhibited at CIRIAC sponsors’ annual fundraising event, and used to illustrate calendars, greeting cards and bookmarks.

Changing expectations

Many people, including teachers and parents, were surprised at how well the participants had coped with activities which are generally thought to require highly developed hand-eye coordination. In my view, there are three main reasons for their success. First, students were allowed to try out the materials without any pre-conceived ideas about their ability to cope or expectations regarding

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results. I always apply this principle in my workshops and I am consistently surprised by how imaginative we human beings are when given the chance.

Second, many educators have a very limited idea about what art is, believing that it basically consists in making faithful copies of objects or subjects. These students might not be able to draw accurate lines, but they are incredibly creative when allowed to mix colours and experiment with different textures. Third, all of them felt highly motivated – possibly because apart from getting a break from their daily routine, they were offered something new and challenging. They were, without exception, greatly satisfied with their work – so much so that at their request I was invited back to teach another art workshop, this time focussing on abstract painting and sculpture, with equally positive results.

The school’s plan for 2014 is to open a permanent art workshop where students can experiment with different materials and even develop long-term projects for local and international exhibitions. **SEN**

Further information

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