

Pdnet Pro Forma Case Study

Case Study title:

Accessible painting activities for students with a variety of physical disabilities.

Child/Young Person's age and barriers to learning:

Students aged 12-19 years, students with variety of physical difficulties, including delayed fine motor skills development, Cerebral Palsy (mild diplegia, moderate quadriplegia and severe quadriplegia – including students using highly bespoke wheelchairs) students with rare chromosomal abnormalities and complex epilepsy.

Setting or School:

2-19 special school for students with severe, profound and multiple learning difficulties*

**Physical adaptations will often be replicable in mainstream settings, across age ranges.*

Background information:

During redevelopment of the upper school curriculums, the opportunity was taken to broaden the Art teaching in this school setting; extending the range of artists studied, techniques used and using Art to engage students with other areas of learning (e.g. developing communication, ICT, Literacy and Maths skills)

What were the main challenges to address?

1. Inaccessibility of standard equipment and workspace set-ups to students with physical disabilities.
2. Lack of variety and focus in painting activities offered to students.
3. Tendency for staff to give high levels of physical support during painting activities, and take over creative direction of task (often focused on the final outcome)

Who was involved?

Curriculum Lead, Teachers, TAs and students across the upper school classes.

What happened?

Designed, trialled and evaluated a series of painting-based Art topics now included in the secondary age curriculum for the school.

- Before trialling activities, teachers reflected that painting tasks were often fully directed/ supported, often to produce a specific outcome (sometimes copied from an exemplar) or were 'free painting' and subsequently often had little focus. Students with physical disabilities affecting their ability to hold and/or control a paintbrush were often heavily supported, and staff often took direction of tasks. Some staff aim to produce 'work parents would want to see' or that 'looks like everyone else's'

- Artists who were chosen to inspire new topics used paint in a variety of ways, and used a range of tools and processes. This supported groups to move away from the 'normal' painting set up and explore other, potentially more accessible, ways of painting.

Artists included: Frank Auerbach (very thick impasto paint), Jackson Pollock (wide range of non-standard painting tools, floor-based work, dripping and splashing paint), Friday Kahlo (did many paintings while lying down, using easels), Damien Hirst (spin paintings, dot paintings), Banksy (stencils and spray paints), Matisse (painted paper then cut out shapes to collage)

- When new painting activities, set ups or equipment were introduced, time was spent exploring the different marks students could make. If access was difficult or the range limited, adjustments to the setup, tools or process were encouraged.
- Students with complex physical disabilities were often observed to be passive during painting activities, and were not always able to see the paper/surface being painted if it was horizontal on a table/tray/their lap. Raising the painting surface allowed better visual engagement in many cases, and often better physical access. Paper (or other flat grounds) was raised via use of easels, taping to walls or windows, taping to large, flat dinner trays (which could be held at a comfortable angle and repositioned easily)
- Working on a larger scale was preferable for some students with physical disabilities, as it let them use gross motor rather than fine motor movements. Display paper, lining paper, fabric and wallpaper offcuts were all easily sourced options to paint on. Mounting these on the floor, large window or wall often allowed better access than table tops.
- For students with limited hand movement, extending the handle of paintbrushes amplified movements – e.g. a small movement of their hand or arm created a large brush stroke. Makeshift handle extensions were made using chopsticks, wooden dowel and garden canes (half length) secured well with tape. Long handles meant some wheelchair users were able to take part in large collaborative wall or floor-based painting activities (dependent on where they could best see)
- Some students who struggled to hold paintbrushes were supported by addition of foam balls or stress balls to the handles (brush handle through the middle) or used velcro on the handle and a glove to keep the brush in their palm.
- Exploring alternative painting processes, effects and tools opened up painting activities for some students who struggled with paint brushes. Examples include: spin paintings (Damien Hirst) – using salad spinners, roundabouts, spinning tops, record player; drip paintings (Jackson Pollock) – using cutlery, toothbrushes, rags, pouring from containers. Some students were encouraged to problem solve and find/invent alternative painting tools themselves.
- Exploring different types of paint and grounds (surface – e.g. paper, fabric, watercolour paper etc.), while an interesting activity in itself, allowed some students to find combinations they found easier to control. For example thicker paint on textured paper provides more friction and can be easier to

control for a student who makes large gross motor movements, while thinner acrylic paint on smooth card or acetate (therefore less friction) may be easier to manipulate for a student who cannot put much pressure through the brush.

Water-based poster paint (standard school paint bottles) can be thickened easily with flour, but is hard to thin without losing intensity of colour.

- Staff often expressed concern about 'mess' during painting tasks, especially larger scale and more exuberant activities, and when students used wheelchairs or other mobility/ postural management equipment. Extensive use of aprons, coveralls, decorators' sheets etc. and planned time to clear up (involving students) reduced this concern over time.

What was the impact? What do the child, young person, family, school, other professionals say about the difference this has made?

- Teachers reported that painting activities became more focused and diverse, with greater student engagement when the focus was on exploring alternative ways of painting.
- Learning objectives focused on motor skills, choice making, following processes and collaboration (often IEP targets) helped to maintain focus on the process rather than the final painting produced.
- Many students produced independent or less-supported work than previously, and were more engaged with the process than when receiving higher levels of support. Some students expressed enjoyment of painting activities when they had previously been ambivalent or disliked them.
- Activities which focused on the process, with no expectation of the outcome, were reported to be effective in challenging staff attitudes, however clear and ongoing direction from teachers was often needed to ensure students remained in control of painting activities.

What are we doing next? Lessons we've learned and top tips to replicate practice:

1. The creative process should be valued at least equally, and often more, than the outcome, and students should retain control throughout the process.
2. Think in 3 dimensions – establish where in the space around them a student can best access the surface to be painted. How can the surface be fixed there?
3. Use the individual student's range of movement as a starting point for selecting and adapting access methods, equipment and set up of the workspace.