



CASE STUDY:

CAMDEN ART CENTRE 2023/24

Framing Collaboration | Sarah B. Davies

The Mildred Fund builds young people's personal, social and creative confidence through art. It supports visual art institutions to work with schools and community groups to provide 13 to 19-year-olds with creative skills for them to thrive.

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Camden Art Centre project details

	School Project	Community Project
Project title	A Gap in the Fence	Sidings Open Art Project
Partners	Maria Fidelis Catholic Secondary School, London Borough of Camden	Sidings Youth Project at Sidings Community Centre, Camden (serving West Hampstead and North Kilburn)
Participants	26 students aged 13-14 years (Year 9)	15 young people aged 14-19 years
Artists	Eva Jonas	Shepherd Manyika
Project team	George Collum, Learning Curator	George Collum, Learning Curator
Programme details	10 sessions at 1 hours each	15 sessions at 2 hours each
Creative outputs	Photography using medium format cameras and instant film cameras; abstracted self-portraits; drawing and map-making	Film, photography, audio, stories

CAMDEN ART CENTRE: JOURNEYS IN CREATIVE CONFIDENCE

The following case study details two Camden Art Centre projects during the first year of its three-year Mildred Fund programme. Aimed at nurturing creative confidence and establishing youth voice, **A Gap in the Fence** and **Sidings Open Art Project** involved students and young people from Camden using art forms such as photography, film, and mapmaking to explore their environments, expand their horizons, and express themselves. The work focused on process-led art sessions that fostered creativity using a wide range of playful mediums that were collectively created by the participants.

What the research highlights: The research highlights the importance of collaboration along with the use of non-representational and accessible art forms to overcome artistic and personal inhibitions. It gives focus to the ways in which carefully selected artistic interventions can usefully navigate perceived and real barriers and reveals how the creation of a highly supportive environment based on trust helps value young people's voices. These various strands woven together ultimately lead to increased creative confidence and engagement.

Effective approaches used: Using widely available and playful artistic techniques | Making work collaboratively at a large scale | Mapping internal and external worlds | Understanding group dynamics | Balancing the known and the new | Flexibility and adaptiveness | Positive disruption within supported frameworks.

INTENTIONS FOR THE JOURNEY

Camden Art Centre's enquiry question sought to uncover 'How can process led art sessions nurture the development of creative confidence and establish "voice"? Can combining this "voice" with accessible artistic techniques and media increase agency and confidence in young people?'

Across the two projects, the Project Lead and the artists involved drew upon specific visual arts disciplines, techniques and

methodologies, including film and photography – "accessible" formats that young people are already interested in, which promote creativity and develop process-based skills. Camden Art Centre aimed for the young participants to utilise these skills and formats to explore their "everyday spaces, experiences and journeys" and to "amplify" their voice, affording them the permission to tell their story.

"... it was exploring this idea ... of expanding their inner worlds, which was something that came out of discussions with the teacher ... They just don't think that far beyond ... their journeys to school and the places that they do go, and they don't necessarily have this inquisitive approach to like the city as a whole ... it's about thinking about the city and their environments in a different way ..."

YOUNG PARTICIPANTS

Camden Art Centre's young participants included a school group of 26 students aged 13-14 years from Maria Fidelis School participating during their art lesson time, and a group of 15 young people aged 14-19 years attending the Sidings Youth Project at the nearby Sidings Community Centre after school. The groups often displayed different social and emotional needs and the Project Lead observed that the age range of the young participants was meaningful:

"Around the ages of 14-16, young people are beginning to form their identity and may have already decided that art is not for them, or that they are "not creative", we found this pervasive in both settings with people saying they were "no good at art" and "didn't have the patience"... these perceptions and limitations refer to a specific, limited view of what creativity and art is."

These perceptions about art often manifested as "inhibitions," particularly when engaging in art that was more representative such as drawing: these inhibitions were seen as a "barrier to their engagement" and also extended to other activities where anxiousness was evident.

However, they were often creative in ways that were possibly not being explored in school. The Project Lead reflected that the quick development of a film script by the Sidings group revealed a lot about their voice, and their unexplored creative appetite for telling their story.

PROJECT JOURNEYS

The journey across A Gap in the Fence and the Sidings Open Art Project included some important markers and approaches along the way.

1. Embracing new visual languages

The Project Lead and the artists worked hard to adapt and attend to the young participants' interests and strengths, particularly those who found artistic practices initially daunting. Mediums and activities that were non-representational allowed them to "engage collectively without the anxiety of representation." Making work with tape or with charcoal tied to bamboo sticks, and physical mapmaking, led to exciting, playful and creative responses. The artforms connected with young people immediately which helped establish confidence and collaboration early on.

The Project Lead further articulated what he had learnt about what works well:

- using restrictive, image making tools i.e. tape, sticks, charcoal and collage (using difficult/ limited materials encourages rule breaking/disruptive creative responses)
- working big where possible (making art a physical act for the body not just hands)
- collaborating (reduces the anxiety over authorship)
- using slow processes i.e. analogue photography, filming with static cameras (reduced the expectation of immediate reward/instant gratification)
- using messy materials i.e. charcoal, printing inks, collage

The [new] artforms immediately connected with young people which helped establish confidence and collaboration early on.

2. Mapping their worlds

Abstracted mapping activities that involved photography, collaborative collage and self-portraits in the school project, and film, photography and audio in the community project, allowed the groups to tell their story in fun and playful ways. The Project Lead reflected that this was an important approach, underpinned by the permission to be creative, that supported the participants to develop their voice and to explore and describe the world around them.

" ... We projected a map of this old river that went from Euston, to Hampstead, which ... conceptually and physically mapped the journey between Camden Art Centre and their school ..."



Eva Jonas Documentation, Camden Art Centre,
18 December 2024 © Camden Art Centre



Eva Jonas Documentation, Camden Art Centre,
18 December 2024 © Camden Art Centre

"There have been really nice moments where people that haven't really engaged earlier on [have become] ... confident and trying things out and being really playful in the ways that they're interpreting ideas. So one of the activities was making these signs for [their map] ... They just made signs that were basically navigating past KFC ... and the way they were talking about it was really just playful and fun ..."

3. Getting a sense of group dynamics

Collaboration is not immediate and requires trust to be built and attentiveness to the needs of the individuals and the group. The artist and Project Lead learned a great deal about the group, the friendships and "social cobwebs" that can shape the ways they work together.

"... Just talking to the pupils en masse was very difficult ... we designed the session so that the group was split in two across two different rooms and that allowed us to essentially work ... with smaller groups of 10/15 at a time ... even in the classrooms that smaller group-based work was working really well and we got such a good sense of ... the group dynamics ..."

"... Both projects creatively explored ... familiar environments, allowing participants to reimagine [and] rethink their roles [and their] capabilities within them."

4. Balancing familiar territory and new spaces

"... This project would enable us to proactively take Camden Art Centre to them in locations they are comfortable in ... to build the trust that is so important" [Original application]

Splitting the project time across both the school/community centre and the gallery, enabled Camden Art Centre to gain a vital perspective on the experiences of the young people and the challenges facing these different institutions. It also enabled the project to take place in familiar territory which was an important approach to increase trust and confidence early on.

"... Both projects creatively explored these familiar environments, allowing participants to reimagine [and] rethink their roles [and their] capabilities within them."

Bringing the groups to Camden Art Centre later allowed the work to expand in scale and for collaboration to build.

"There's a difference in their engagement, because they've been taken out of the school environment ... a large space without any distractions in it – having more space, I think it was a huge thing ... being able to ... think differently about the way they are able and allowed to occupy space in a really, really positive way."

5. Listening

The Project Lead reflected on the importance of adults (artists and facilitators) who demonstrate creativity and playfulness, and who were ready to listen and pay attention. Young people responded well to being "listened to and respected by adults that are not in hierarchical positions of power."

"Through creative play/exploration the participant's voices and suggestions are valued and taken forward seriously or as positive contributions. Establishing this dynamic allows the young people agency at a time in their lives where this can feel limited in school and domestic settings."

CREATIVE CONFIDENCE

"This approach undoubtedly led to more confidence from those that deemed themselves 'not good at art'."

One of the strongest outcomes identified by the Project Lead was a marked increase in "creative confidence" – the capacity to engage in an idea, subject or medium, take risks and bold actions to express themselves. The Project Lead observed deeper engagement, playfulness in interpreting ideas, more confidence in communicating and greater experimentation.

They have also formed new relationships through the "processes of discovery," and changed their perspective of what art can be. Through permission to be creative, they have developed their voice to confidently tell their story in new ways – a "new language of communication through creativity."

One young person ...

"... consistently created interesting, surprising responses to the activities, his first drawing which detailed a very specific part of the school gave the project its title [A Gap in the Fence]. He encouraged his classmates ... and was able to make interesting conceptual links that he described as 'elegant connections'."

"Cutting out shapes, using the old cameras and drawing in new ways, we hadn't done any of this in our classes before ..."

Another young person ...

"... was self-proclaimed 'no good at art' and found the structures of art lessons in school restrictive and alienating. He said that through the activities we led and the atmosphere we created he felt able to engage in ways that he didn't feel he could before. He enjoyed the accessibility of the activities and working in groups."

LEARNING: EFFECTIVE PROCESSES AND CONDITIONS

Some of the effective processes and important conditions that supported the young participants included:

- Striking the right balance between respecting the existing rules, systems and frameworks when working within schools and community settings, versus providing opportunities for "positive disruption."
- Motivation can naturally wane, and one group became "disinterested" when the film moved into the editing phase – which may have felt less creative and less within their control. Working long-term enables projects to adapt to the "rhythms" of the young people. "Flexibility, responsiveness and listening" is important in long-term programmes to address these lulls and respond with new approaches.
- Celebration events may be worrisome for young people after building trust within their group. On the other hand it can "legitimise creative endeavours."
- Smaller groups work well and friendships are important for engagement.
- Relevant, accessible artforms will connect quickly with young people.
- Process-based methods help address any anxiety about skilfulness or quality.

"All we used to do was draw something, like a lemon on the table ... I'm not good at art because my drawing is terrible ... but working with mates made it easier, because you can solve things together ... the activities were more accessible when you lot came. I'm glad you guys came."

(Young person)



Cover image: Sidings Community Centre project participants © Patrick Young, Camden Art Centre