

TRANSCRIPT



Whitechapel Gallery

Bridging The Digital Divide



AK: Hello and welcome to Bridging the Digital Divide, a Whitechapel Gallery podcast that delves into how arts organisations are supporting schools during a pandemic. I'm your host Alex Kais, Curator of Schools and Teachers at The Whitechapel Gallery. I'm joined today by Chloe Randall, Programmes Manager of Arts Organisation and New Direction and, Kerri Sellens, Assistant Head Teacher at Lansbury Lawrence Primary. Welcome to you both.

The gallery has been addressing the new challenges posed by the pandemic and the consequent need to invest more resources in digital learning programmes that enables schools to engage with art through blended modes of learning. Schools have had to close, reopen and then close again. How can we, as arts organisations, show our solidarity and support schools?

COVID-19 has revealed disparities between schools, particularly in terms of access to technology. Schools that were able to send tech home, such as Chrome Books or iPads, saw their students creativity flourish in a way where they were taking extra initiatives to submit creative projects outside of the curriculum tasks that were already assigned. This data was collected from several nearby schools, in the Tower Hamlets and Newham areas, during our training sessions. Other schools with less tech resources found it challenging to keep in touch with their students and to engage them creatively from home.

We have been talking to teachers and peers about the needs of schools and local organisations and how we can best remain relevant during this period and in the near future. We will be discussing the impact that partnerships with art organisations have on schools, how this connects to the curriculum and to the Artsmark

framework and introducing a free resource made by The Whitechapel Gallery, the Open Tours Postcards allow teachers to discuss various works of art with their students, using key questions and prompts to promote a dialogue. These would normally be used in the gallery, but we'll discuss how the themes and questions can be used, by teachers, when working remotely.

Chloe, could you tell us a little bit more about your role and what you do at New Direction please?

CR: Yes, hi. So I'm Chloe Randall, I am a Programme Manager at New Direction and New Direction is a London based non-profit, generating opportunities for children and young people to unlock their creativity. So we work with partners, across the education, cultural and creative industries, as well as local government and businesses and we aim to support children and young people to be creative and experience culture.

AK: And welcome to you, Kerri. Kerri, can you tell us a little bit about what you do?

KS: Hi, Alex. Yeah, I'm Assistant Head, with responsibility for the wider curriculum at Lansbury Lawrence, which is a primary school, a community primary school in Poplar, Tower Hamlets and, within my role, I also lead art and design technology subjects too.

AK: Fantastic. We know that partnerships are so important and I think now, even more so with COVID, it's really, really clear how important these partnerships are, which leads me into my first questions, for you, Kerri. How was working with The Whitechapel Gallery, and other organisations, impacted your school pre-COVID?

KS: Yeah. Well working with arts and cultural organisations, it's been integral to our creative offer, at Lansbury Lawrence, especially local organisations like The Whitechapel, with whom, you know, we've built up a brilliant relationship over the past few years.

We hope to inspire our pupils to express themselves, in all sorts of ways, and working with professional arts practitioners facilitates this. Collaborating with artists, designers, dancers, musicians and actors, it is a valuable experience that children remember and partnering with The Whitechapel, and other organisations, has made our curriculum purposeful, it's made it relevant. It's made us ambitious and it's opened up opportunities for us for further collaboration and communication.

CR: It's great to hear such rich opportunities within your school and it would be great to know how your school has adapted to continue offering those enrichment opportunities during COVID.

KS: Yes. Well, you know, it has been a very steep learning curve, over the past year, we normally organise a trip for every year group, each half term, taking full advantage of all the amazing cultural resources that London has to offer children, the advantage of living in a city, but this year, you know, it just hasn't been possible, for obvious reasons.

So we've taken advantage of the galleries and museums that have virtual tours or workshops, available at the moment, which I suppose is one positive from COVID, in that these opportunities are now open to all schools nationally, nobody has to travel in to Central London anymore, well, not at the moment.

We've organised whole school trip days and that's where every year group goes on a trip, on the same day, using these virtual resources and, again, you know, that's another impossible feat we wouldn't normally be able to do in real life. But virtually, in school, we're coming together for whole school drawing assemblies, we're focussing on drawing skills, as a collective, which has been, you know, a brilliant opportunity, that we wouldn't have done previously, and it's been really lovely for wellbeing as well, the whole school is calmly drawing together, at the same time.

Some things have stayed the same or similar, you know, following guidance, we've continued our instrumental provision, in school, where we have 120 children receiving music lessons each week. So it's just things have to adapt and you have to change them a bit, like, it's a bit of a military operation, making it work, but we've got a big school, and we do make it work, even with three metres distance between everyone. But, of course, we've been very reliant on technology and not just our own technology, in school, but also making sure our families can access the learning at home.

AK: You and I, Kerri, have spoken, kind of, in depth about this. Could you tell me more about what the term digital divide is?

KS: Sure, yeah. Well, you know, in the first lockdown, it became apparent, very quickly, who could access online learning and who couldn't and this was for all sorts of reasons, no devices, no internet, one device shared between siblings, getting used to using new devices, getting used to using new software. And we had to support a lot of families through loaning out our school supply of chrome books and support with them

with getting children logged on to all of the different learning platforms, but it was a real team effort, between the school and between our community as well and we had account managers assigned to provide regular contact between home and school and the relationships have really grown.

And this lockdown, you know, we've been really lucky to have more Chrome Books donated to us, which has been fantastic. We have almost 100 per cent of our pupils now able to access our live lessons and online content and we're in daily contact with any children who still need a bit of further support.

So it's a different way of working and quite intense, looking at a screen all day, so we've made Friday afternoon screen free time and for our key worker children, in school, we have music, drama, PE and forest school lessons timetabled.

We're still in touch with cultural organisations and still trying to move forward with projects, you know, as much as we can and we all have to be really adaptable, taking one day at a time, but it's really important we don't lose touch of the vision and the bigger picture and, hopefully, it won't be like this forever. We keep that in the back of our minds. What's it been like from the perspective of the gallery, Alex, trying to engage with schools during the pandemic?

AK: I think, like you said, things have obviously changed from the last, you know, three lockdowns. At the beginning, when the schools were still open, we were able to engage with the schools directly, talk about them. I think the initial first thing I did was check in on the teachers, in the first instance, it's checking in on their wellbeing and seeing how they are and how

organisations, like The Whitechapel Gallery, can support the teachers so it doesn't become overbearing.

It actually becomes central to their curriculum, so that when we sit down with teachers, the projects and the virtual opportunities, that we provide for them, are cross curricular. So it becomes a partnership between the school and The Whitechapel Gallery and, obviously, once the schools were closed, that became a challenge, because safeguarding issues were cropping up where we weren't really able to virtually, you know, zoom into the student's room, which we completely respect, from an organisation's point of view.

So a few things have halted, but, obviously, we have tried to provide opportunities to now just check in with the teachers, through CPDs and through weekly calls, when they want, it's really important to make sure that it's coming from both sides and it becomes supportive. But the basic thing we've done is, is readapt those projects to the needs of the schools, to the needs of the individual schools, so, at the end of the day, we've provided a workshop that is bespoke as if you were in the gallery, but virtual.

Kerri, you've worked with The Whitechapel Gallery for a number of years now, how has working with us changed and what was your favourite project to work on with the gallery?

KS: Well, just before lockdown, Lansbury Lawrence worked on a really lovely community project with the gallery, it was with an amazing ceramic artist, Francesca Anfossi, and Francesca runs a community space called Rochester Square and Rochester Square is a really magical place to visit, all tumbling greenhouses, plants and lots and lots of clay.

And we devised this project around food and art, you know, what a brilliant combination, and pupils worked with their families, alongside Francesca, and made these intricate delicate clay forms inspired by the Anna Maria Maiolino exhibition, at the gallery, so, you know, it's very recent, but it was so much fun, like, making pasta, making art and just strengthening relationships with families. And I remember talking to one of the mums about the virus taking hold, you know, on the train, on the way to one of the workshops at Rochester Square, it was in the news, but it seemed a long way away, you know, how wrong we were and how quickly things changed.

So with the galleries, you know, now closed, a lot has changed, you know, no sharing plates of food together, at the moment, but it doesn't mean that the relationship isn't still there though, even though, during this time, with us all wrapped up in our own bubbles, I still see The Whitechapel as a really close associate of Lansbury Lawrence and, you know, we're ready to visit, explore, plan and create, as soon as it's safe to do so.

AK: And we will welcome you with open arms, Kerri.

KS: Chloe, how do you foresee the future of partnerships going forward?

CR: Well, as Alex said, right at the start of this conversation, partnerships are going to be more important than ever as we move forward through this pandemic. Children and young people have had reduced teaching time, leading to the inevitable catch up with the core subjects. So schools really should be considering how partnerships of creative organisations can enhance catching up with core subjects and how they

can have a long lasting impact on children and young people.

They've also missed out on a year of visiting artists, performers and other, kind of, creative agencies, meaning that they've lost out on opportunities to access the arts, outside of their formal lessons, to explore creative outlets that they might not have discovered at home and to also discover creative career routes.

Partnerships between schools and the cultural sector can also ensure a positive and inclusive experience, something that's very important after such a long time out of schools, and with families having disparate access to culture through lockdown. And it's not just the schools and young people who benefit from partnerships, organisations also need to be thinking and considering partnerships with schools as part of their own programme to recovery. Co creation with young people can really strengthen and deepen an organisation's offer to schools and really support their general development, as an organisation, moving forwards and out of this pandemic. Kerri, in what way does your school engage with the arts?

KS: Well, initially, we use the Artsmark framework to evaluate or strengths and areas of development and we now have a really strong foundation for our provision and engaging with all art forms. We link a lot of our arts projects to our heritage, our school was built as part of the Festival of Britain and has some interesting architectural features, including original Peggy Angus murals, and we try and thread this, you know, through our projects, year after year, so that our pupils understand this history.

We've really developed our dance offer, in recent years, which has been brilliant, working with professional dancers to express ourselves through movement. But we're always driving forward with our arts, finding creative ways to learn and engage. We nurture young leaders in the arts through our in school arts council, which is a cross phase group of children who apply to be in it each year.

We're having to have our meetings online, at the moment, of course, but it is exciting to talk about what we might be working on in the future and discussing ideas about how we can make the arts at Lansbury Lawrence even better.

AK: Sounds like some really exciting things are happening at your school, Kerri. With the curriculum, that's constantly changing, I'm going to throw a question out to Chloe, how can we make sure that art is not neglected while students are working remotely?

CR: Oh gosh, creativity is so important for developing young people's critical thinking, curiosity, problem solving skills, it supports wellbeing so much more and that is why keeping the arts, kind of, going throughout this remote working period is really important. A lot of children, and young people, may feel disengaged with their education right now and creative activities can support them to feel that they have a voice in what's happening and to support learning in and across other subjects. So it's therefore really important that art, music and drama and other creative skills continue to be planned for use in remote teaching.

Having said that, many students working remotely don't have access to the same materials they would have access to at school and also they might not have a

parent or carer who is able to dedicate large portions of time to support them with creative projects or even just physically having space, where they currently live. Therefore, I think keeping materials simple is important, encouraging the use of things that are easily available around the house, such as, recycling, food items and clothing.

A lot of organisations have creative resources, looking at creative activities that can be explored at home, many using household items, for example, Crafts Council, they've written about using turmeric and vinegar and old T shirts to try out Japanese Shibori dyeing and so there's loads of examples of organisations putting suggestions out there for schools to use.

And, actually, if you Google keeping creative at home, the top result you get takes you to a series of blog posts, written for New Direction, all about creative activities that can be completed at home, looking at lots of different art forms and organisations have also been posting to our platform called Look Up about remote opportunities that they have, which teachers can use to incorporate into planning for remote learning and these include all sorts of things, like, printable resources, video resources, virtual tours, all sorts of things to help support creativity at home.

KS: There really are some good resources out there, you know, we're using a lot within our school too, but, Chloe, what does Artsmark look like during a pandemic.

CR: That's a good question. Every schools Artsmark journey is unique, even in pre-COVID times, so it's hard to paint a picture of exactly what Artsmark, during a

pandemic looks like. For new schools, Artsmark is a very useful tool for thinking about arts and culture and the positive roles that they can play. Sharing skills, wellbeing, creative use of space and resources, communication and inclusion are all themes that the Artsmark process can support and enhance.

Part of the Artsmark has a self assessment framework and that framework can be used to base recovery in school around and can support areas for development identified in the school improvement plan. For schools already on their Artsmark journey, plans have inevitably changed and one of the documents you write, as an Artsmark school, is a statement of impact, looking back at your Artsmark journey, talking about what you did, over the past two years, how you embedded arts and culture throughout the school, but it also asks about changes that have happened.

Now, in normal times, there's a lot of changes within schools, such as, kind of, change of leadership, merging with another school, perhaps becoming an academy and there is space in that document to write how those changes have impacted the school and the journey that they hoped to go on, as part of their Artsmark plans.

I expect now all schools will be using that space to talk about the impact COVID has had on their delivery and what they have done to adapt and to continue to deliver some form of arts and culture to their students.

Schools who have already submitted the first document, which is the statement of commitment, where schools are setting out what they plan to do with their Artsmark journey, they've been offered extensions

by Arts Council England, who are the awarding body for Artsmark.

And us, at New Direction, we continue to offer support to all schools at any point in their Artsmark journey, we have one to one calls available, which you can hop on to and have a chat with one of our consultants about any concerns you have, whether that's, kind of, how to evidence partnership working throughout this time or whether you want to have your draft statements read through before submitting. So there's lots of support out there for schools and the journeys, pre COVID and during COVID, are very different for every single school and that's the special thing about Artsmark, it's really flexible and unique to each school that goes through it.

AK: That's great. We talked about giving something back to the teachers, a resource, something that would aid the teachers in their creative process. Initially this resource was created for the gallery, as a starting point through our community resources, and it was selected based on themes, based on different topics, however, this then changed.

So this collaborative, creative process looked at various themes that connected to various projects that teachers and groups were already working with and we wanted to develop these further by providing them now, initially, to give to teachers and to work on them, to adapt them in the way that works.

KS: And how can the resource be used remotely, Alex?

AK: So we're providing hard copies, as I mentioned, but also offering a digital version of this resource and I think digital is the new way forward, when approaching educational resources, during these times. We know

that some students and teachers are very tactile and like to feel things, but, for now, this resource is versatile in a way that it can be accessed remotely, that when we provide it for our teachers, they are then able to adapt it into their curriculum.

And, again, with our guidance, we're always there on the other side, that's part of my role, at The Whitechapel Gallery, is to provide that support and guidance to teachers and sometimes teachers need a sound board and go, I'm thinking about doing it like this, you know, what do you think? And I think it's going to be changing and I think it's going to look different for each school. How do you think you could use this resource for Key Stage One versus Key Stage Two?

KS: Yeah. So Key Stage One, they're the younger year group, so aged between five and seven and Key Stage Two, seven to eleven, so Key Stage One, years one and two and then Key Stage Two, year three all the way up to year six.

I think some of the themes of the resource immediately lend themselves more to younger children, such as the materials, feelings and actions, because they really stood out straight away, like, perfect for Key Stage One. But I think the questions are all interesting and the concept of an open tour, where the teacher or the child is the curator, of what work is discussed in detail, is really interesting and that's really adaptable to all key stages.

It's very open ended and inclusive and these questions would perhaps prompt other questions from children to explore and discuss and debate. They're a good starting point for looking closely and thinking deeper.

AK: Thanks for listening to our podcast, Bridging the Digital Divide, we wanted to take the time to thank all educators out there for everything they're doing and, of course, our speakers, Chloe and Kerri. If you'd like a hard copy of the Open Tours Postcard resource, please email me at Alexkais@whitechapelgallery.org . Bye for now.

Transcribed by 1st Class Secretarial Services