

'Working with Children and Young People' - Kids' Own Professional Development Session in association with Visual Artists Ireland

Temple bar studios, Dublin, 7th October 2008

A report by Ruby Wallis (participant)

Workshop based activities for Artists working with children and young people.

During the course of the day there were a series of activities, which had been devised by Orla Kenny and Yvonne Cullivan.

The first activity was an introductory exercise in which all the participants were given a small piece of paper and a pen; each person was then asked to make an expressive (not necessarily literal) drawing/diagram representing their practice with young people. This took about five minutes to complete and after this all the individuals explained their approach using the drawing. The facilitators of the workshop paid particular attention to where the participants had placed themselves on the page. This activity generally warmed up the group and led to most people giving a brief (or not so brief!) account of themselves and their approach and their previous experience of working as artists with young people.

The second activity involved the whole group splitting in to smaller groups (of four or five), who then divided into different areas of the room where a large piece of paper had been taped to the wall. Each page had a different title written on it these introduced questions such as;

Motivation;

- Why?; Why work with children and young people?
- How?; how you communicate your practice and your approach?
- Who? What are your working relationships, who are involved?
- What? What are the main elements of this practice?

This encouraged the participants to begin to discuss their attitude and approach to the different questions. Each individual wrote up their thoughts on to the sheet and then moved around to the next area, where they then interacted with a different question. This then sparked a general discussion related to all the issues and thoughts that this activity had provoked; the participants found the activity very useful and I think in many cases inspiring. The benefits often being that artists had in many ways found their own way of working with young people and hadn't had the opportunity previously to share their practice methodology within a distinct critical framework.

The third activity (which was to be a surprise after lunch) began with 5 individuals from the whole group going back to the studio earlier than the rest to prepare. The remaining members followed on to the studio about twenty minutes later. Again the group was broken into five and divided between three activity tables. At each table an individual from the group then led an artistic activity to the other four. This involved each person being given a piece of clay and asked to form a self portrait in some way – being part of one of the groups I will now refer to my own experience as a case study.

"I found myself trying to think of a way to represent myself through the clay, wanting time to explore the clay and sink in to a space of experimentation, I didn't have a clear idea of what I wanted the end result to be – I just wanted time to play, the activity facilitator kept on making comments and although they were encouraging, I found myself reacting to them and feeling almost 'over' encouraged. I found that even though the comments were positive, I was limited by them and even slightly suffocated. The group leader also seemed to be making comparisons between the different individuals, which I was very aware of. This made me more aware of the subtleties of language and it's nuances when commenting on young peoples work."

When the twenty-minute activity came to an end the group was told what the notion behind it the activity had been – each group leader had been given a remit as to their role as a facilitator. These ranged from taking on the role of 'encouraging' to completely 'prescriptive' and also 'dominating'. We then discussed our various reactions and observations to the activity – This again provoked and created a very dynamic interaction between the whole group with a definite air of self-inquiry and analysis.

I thought the activities were a great success and flagged up a number of important questions relevant to the process of working with children and young people in an artistic way.