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## Developing a contemporary art curriculum: Hillview School for Girls

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### Brief description

This case study highlights how a school transformed students' achievement from good to outstanding by developing its practice to reflect the criteria for 'outstanding' articulated in Ofsted's subject-specific guidance. Central to this improvement was the impact of investment in a challenging programme of professional development with Goldsmiths University, which was cascaded very effectively across the department.

### Overview – the school's message

'As teachers, we need to be immersed in the practice of our subjects. We need to use our own creativity; think beyond our examination results and develop students who are open to new ideas and who really engage with the world. We need to take risks with the teaching so that students develop the imagination to make leaps in their learning'.

*Cavan Pledge, Curriculum Leader Technology and Visual Arts*

### The good practice in detail

‘...art has allowed us to be more expressive, explorative and experimental with our ideas and chosen concepts. The subject allows for independent exploration that helps with your own individual creativity’

A creative ethos permeates the school's approach to teaching and learning. The students are supported by excellent opportunities to meet creative practitioners and leaders of Further Education courses. The visual arts department successfully fosters a personal sense of awe and wonder in students' minds that engages them with the world, their own world experiences and that of others. Staff support students in critical engagement so that they

are not consumers but are critics, manipulators and creators of images. Students are encouraged to utilise their personal interest and growing expertise in other curriculum areas as a focus for their own artistic exploration. This can lead to learners gaining a breadth of contextual knowledge that they would not necessarily gain from their subject-specific experiences.

The improvements seen are a result of a holistic approach to securing improvement across all aspects of provision for the visual arts. As Cavan, the curriculum leader explains, 'It is quite difficult to identify any distinct elements that have taken us forward. The process has been evolutionary, with core elements of a strong ethos being expanded and adjustments made to schemes of work, modes of delivery and assessment to open up the sense of what art is, what it can be and where it takes place, thus taking it beyond the fixed concept of the student artist'.

‘Visiting a gallery helped me to understand how the space that art is presented in affects its meaning. It also highlighted how art is about experiencing or perceiving its meaning for yourself, whether this be through traditional paintings or modern installations’

The catalyst for some of the more radical changes has undoubtedly come through the curriculum leader's work as a student on the MA 'Artist Teachers and Contemporary Practices' course at Goldsmiths University. This has led to engagement with new media and much personal reflection and team discussion about what art and education are about.

'The MA helped rationalise deep learning opportunities where the importance of the personal meta-cognition that takes place within the students' art-making processes and responses need to be fed and nurtured and the introduction of contemporary practices and new media have been useful tools in making this happen. As a direct consequence, there has been more discussion with students about their art-making experiences, which has led many of them to a much deeper understanding of the creative process and greater control over their own learning'.

Students are introduced to a range of art practices through thought-provoking themes, each of which connects the learner with whom and what they are. Examples of the themes currently explored are Year 7 'Journeys', Year 8 'Conflict', Year 9 'Structures', Year 10 'Identity', Year 11 'Transition', and Year 12, 'Concealed and Revealed'. In Years 10, 11 and 12 students negotiate the direction they will explore within a theme. Year 13 students negotiate their own focus and work on self-directed study. The teaching team and the students are involved in the development and refinement of the themes; how they are delivered is always open to critical appraisal. They evolve and change and are used to expand the students' concept of what art is and each one addresses both historical and contemporary practice across a range of cultures.



Projects are carefully planned to support progression, for example the theme 'Journeys' enables students to explore their feelings about the transition from primary to secondary school and to explore the physical space of their new school. Their thinking about representations of the world around them, and exploration of abstract concepts develops through mark-making, colour and mapping. Contemporary artists, such as Alexandra Handal and Guillermo Kuitca who engage with issues around mapping, migration and diaspora, are used to prepare students' thinking for the Year

8 theme which explores issues around 'Conflict'. Year 7 sketchbooks are investigatory journals where students learn different ways to connect with the art-making process and practices. The emphasis at this stage is on confidence building and eliciting genuine responses to ideas and concepts.

Through immersion in a range of contemporary drawing and recording practises focused on process, expression and idea, students' preconceptions of what drawing is are challenged; to unpick the limited notion that drawing is only successful if it looks 'real'. Staff are well aware that many students have low self-esteem and do not see themselves as having artistic ability, based on a visual assessment of their own practice compared with their peers. Great value is therefore placed on a broad range of creative practices and artistic responses as this takes students into unfamiliar areas which create a whole new set of values, unpicking their preconceptions about what 'good' art looks like.

Assessment practices are used to promote students' confidence and self-belief. The department is piloting the marking of Year 7 work by not sharing the attainment levels with students, but providing constructive comments and targets regularly, written on 'sticky notes' in their sketchbooks. Self- and peer-assessment also focuses on particular strengths, followed by possible improvements. Students respond positively by revisiting and refining their work, an overwhelmingly positive experience. The emphasis is much more on the quality of engagement and response than on a notional level of attainment, giving students the opportunity to explore and learn to accept that they can make art.

Parents have responded positively. 'Although my daughter is only in Year 7, I feel that Hillview has managed to capture her interest in art and boosted her confidence', says one parent. 'I particularly like the fact that the girls are not given grades for their work initially which I feel stops them from becoming negative about their ability and level of creativity. In an era where the education system seems to have become obsessed with grades and exam results I find this approach refreshing... As a practising artist I know only too well how important it is to feel confident about your work. It makes the children feel that they can achieve anything'.

Another parent says that, 'it is the freedom of scope given to the students to explore their artistic talents and ideas...art spurs my daughter on to do more; there are no boundaries and for kids with imagination it is amazing to see how they develop. The concept of "better if..." is also extremely positive and empowering to the students too, encouraging them to expand their thinking and ideas'.

The aim is to open students' minds up to the idea that art making is not just a personal adventure about them and the world, but that it is exploration and discovery that is to be shared with others. Knowing that their work will be exhibited encourages a greater maturity in their practice. For students to be in a position to produce mature work, staff recognise that they need to encourage students to be ambitious and to be risk takers.

'As teachers, we aim to bring the expansive creative skills of the artist into the place of learning', says Cavan. 'We share our own artwork with students and take a creative approach to launching new projects incorporating workshop activities and happenings which are designed to take students outside their "comfort zones" and to encourage new thinking. Key to our approach is that we have a clear purpose in what we do but we do not prescribe what the outcome will be. Recent projects have started with responses to the school environment or within immersive art installations that incorporate video, sound and projection. These



temporary setups enable students to imagine beyond the studio space and to access their own imaginative powers’.

The high quality of students’ reflection and response justifies the considerable work involved. Lily, a Year 10 student says: ‘You felt you were part of the work we were doing and like we were submerged by the coast and sea. It personalised the sea and made me realise what a huge unstoppable force it is, but it could be a very lonely place too’.

For students to ‘think and act like artists’, an aim of the National Curriculum, staff recognise that students need a range of role models. With the support of the school’s Careers and Education Adviser, they are developing a network of artists and designers to work with students across different years. Parents and ex-students who have gone on to study the subject at degree level have provided a rich source of contacts with creative practitioners willing to help. In 2010/11, students studying three-dimensional design have benefited from the expertise of one of the country’s top set designers, photography students have been able to use a professional studio and fine art students have experienced workshops run by an ex-student and practicing artist.



The relationship between the artist and school can be a symbiotic one in which all parties benefit from the collaboration. Ruby Manson, a visiting contemporary artist says: ‘Working at Hillview has enabled me to consider more about my own practice. The students are introduced to artists working in creative industries, such as photographers and set designers, which means that I have had the opportunity to meet people and broaden my own knowledge. It has also led me to seriously consider going forward in a career in art education.’



Role models are also provided by older students. Younger students visit GCSE, BTEC and A-Level lessons and interview students as if they are practising artists. Visits to further education colleges and galleries expand the learning beyond the studio and provide students with an understanding of the wider context within which they are working. Students have recently taken part in the Tate Gallery’s ‘Turbinegeneration’ collaboration with schools in Columbia and India and the National Gallery’s ‘Picture in Focus’, which provided a collaborative cross-curricular experience for Year 8 students between art, science, geography, English and dance. Last year the ‘Turbinegeneration’ project enabled students from Years 8 to 10 to work collaboratively with dance students and to produce a very successful fusion of art and dance, stage managed and choreographed by the students themselves. Engaging with art beyond the art studio environment also helps students recognise the importance of visual communication and develop their capacity for using its currency to engage with the world.

The school recognises that to develop truly creative and independent learners who are open to new ideas and understanding, they need to take risks too. Staff consider contemporary art practices and new media technologies fundamental in creating ‘journeys into the unknown’, taking students on the full journey of art making from conception to curation and exhibition; transforming good to outstanding!

## The school's background

Hillview School for Girls is a larger than average performing arts specialist school serving an area that contains some selective schools. Since September 2006 it has collaborated with neighbouring schools for sixth form provision. The school holds Artsmark Gold, Healthy Schools Status, Clean Food Award, Investor in Careers Award and the International School Award. In addition, it has achieved Investor in People status. Most students are from White British backgrounds. The percentage of students eligible for free school meals is just below average. The proportion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is below the national average but increasing. The school converted to academy status under the provisions of the Academies Act 2010, on 1 August 2011.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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