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## Excellence in art: Durham Johnston Comprehensive School

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### Brief description

This case study illustrates the approaches used to secure students' excellent progress and high achievement in art in a school sixth form. Durham Johnston Comprehensive School has gained an excellent reputation for students' skilful work on a large scale, reflected in the school's success in achieving a Saatchi prize and selection for the Royal Academy of Arts Online A-level exhibition.

### Overview – the school's message

'My motivation lies in the challenge of providing an excellent art education for young people that opens doors and provides opportunities beyond their expectations. I believe that they should be nurtured and encouraged to become confident individuals in whatever they do, including drawing. I consider excellence to be an attainable goal if teaching and learning promotes high achievement and personal success.

I have always felt a deep sense of fulfilment from art and passionately believe that the subject can break down barriers between abilities, gender and cultures. All children have the ability to communicate visually - they just need to be shown the way.'

*Sheila Hitchcock, subject leader for art*

### The good practice in detail

#### Developing an excellent understanding of visual concepts

From the start of school in Year 7, students learn about visual concepts and how to apply them. For example, individual projects teach students how to explore and use colour with increasing skill and sensitivity. Understanding visual concepts is a key focus of teachers' questioning and advice. As a result when students reach the sixth form they are able to exploit visual concepts confidently. Course evaluations by Year 8 students capture their enjoyment and ability to reflect on specific objectives:



'My favourite piece of art work this year was the abstract painting inspired by music. The colours and shapes used reflected the mood. The gentle gradation of colours could be slow music and bright bold colours happy. I painted very intricate abstract patterns; the music gave the painting different dynamics of colours and shapes'. *Student in Year 8*

Visual concepts provide a focus of evaluations made by students and staff. Sixth form students emphasise the importance of continuous experimentation and criticism; a process that is well managed by staff:

'This course allows you to cultivate previous talents while developing new ones. A key to success is improvement through critiques'. *Student in Year 12*

'I found the course challenging but the critiques invaluable, making me reflect and develop the confidence to make decisions'. *Student in Year 13*

## Effective teaching strategies

Students' prior experience is used well to provide opportunities for them to demonstrate their drawing skills, their understanding of artists and their creativity in response to the stimuli provided. Staff assess students' responses as a team to identify the need for particular teaching strategies, and ensure that targets are set appropriately.

'Those who say they can't are taught how they can, and those who can are given opportunities to see the potential of their skills.' *Sheila Hitchcock*

There is a buzz in lessons and a lively productive atmosphere. Students are nurtured, encouraged and challenged to aim high and regard excellence as an attainable goal. Underpinning a range of exciting projects in different media, including 3D, is the promotion of drawing as a key subject skill. Because additional students join the school in the sixth form, opportunities to diagnose strengths and weaknesses are provided, through experimentation with different media. Students relish the high levels of challenge.



## Different media are explored

Printmaking, photography and painting combine to improve drawing skills across a range of media. Different media and techniques present distinctive possibilities that students exploit in their work. For example, students learn how to combine detailed, controlled work with

accidental qualities, through the experience of printmaking. They see their carefully drawn and crafted print blocks when inked and printed, transformed by the process. The links between printmaking and painting are made early, throughout Key Stage 3. While students reach high standards in their painting, work in other media contributes strongly to their overall achievement.



### Using photography well

Students take and manipulate their own images as part of the creative process. Photography enables them to use processes that develop as quickly as their thinking. Images are often generated as a visual resource when considering composition. Photography enables students to explore topics, ideas and observations extensively. These are a rich source of discussion between students and with their teachers as ideas progress. The exploration of topics through the use of photography is introduced during Key Stage 3.

### Excellent outcomes

The high-quality outcomes achieved reflect the excellent teaching and the high importance students attach to the subject. The many applications of art, craft and design are emphasised throughout the course.

'Art must be perceived as an important subject and its role in our lives recognised – from the clothes we wear and the chairs we sit on, to the packaging we admire enough to make us buy a product'. *Sheila Hitchcock*





## The school's background

[Durham Johnston School](#) is a large 11-18 comprehensive school in Durham with a sixth form. A below-average proportion of students is known to be eligible for free school meals. The percentage of students from minority ethnic groups is average as is that of students who speak English as an additional language. The proportion of students who have special educational needs and/or disabilities is below average. The school has gained Healthy School and International School status.

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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