

Welcome to Our Town

exploring history and heritage with Reading's libraries



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Not long into the Autumn term in 2017, Reading-based arts organisations Jelly and The Rock Academy embarked on a new programme with local schools, Redlands Primary, Oxford Road Primary, Oakbank School, Reading Girls School, and iCollege in Calcot. Their aim: to continue previous engagement work that enabled them to strengthen links with schools who had already engaged in their Discover Arts Award programme back in 2016. This new project would expand on these connections, whilst collaborating with both Reading Central Libraries and UTC Reading, who offer an innovative approach to learning that offers 14-19 year olds access to specialist programmes alongside the more traditional subjects of English, Maths and Science.

The People

- Jelly, Reading
- The Rock Academy
- Reading Central Library
- Redlands Primary School
- Oxford Road Primary School
- UTC Reading
- Oakbank School
- Reading Girls School
- iCollege, Calcot

We hope that this exposure to the archives made the children realise that libraries are about so much more than books.

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Kate Powell, Jelly

The project was split into two very defined streams, one led by Jelly, and the other by the Rock Academy, in order to reach as diverse an audience as possible. “The idea was to encourage as many different age groups as we could, and support them to look at their local libraries in a different light”, explains Jelly’s Kate.

Working with Reading Central Library, Jelly devised a programme of activities to engage children in thinking about the town they lived in, and how it might change in the future. As part of this, they visited the library and spent time in the Social History Department, learning about the town’s past. It has been a resounding success, too, reports Kate. “The project transformed the children into architects, whilst they researched, explored and imagined a Reading of the past and of the future. They looked at pictures and maps of Reading from years gone by, and studied architects including Zaha Hadid, Antoni Gaudi, and Thomas Heatherwick.”

This research provided the perfect opportunity for the pupils to experiment with techniques used by architects, and they were able to play with all kinds of collage, printmaking and model making.

The project culminated in an exhibition at Jelly, which is situated in Broad Street Mall. Children from Oxford Road Primary and Redlands Primary Schools visited during the week and were able to return at the weekend to show their families too.

As part of the project, both Jelly and The Rock Academy embarked on Arts Award

Discover. Jelly worked with Year 1 children (ages 5-6), while Rock Academy engaged with older children/young people, aged between 11-18.

Rock Academy’s approach was a project called The Band Experience, which took its focus from music performance and composition. Participants worked with a band coach to develop original songs, whilst learning about composition, instrumental performance, music technology and music coding. All students were given targets that were monitored on a regular basis so they could directly observe the process they were making along the way.

“The starting point for the Arts Award was to reflect on the creative experiences they have taken part in, both as an active participant (performer, music creator, and so on), and as an audience members/observer. They discussed as a group and then documented the information in their Discover Arts Award booklets”, explains Powell. “The aim was to celebrate the varied creative experiences they have had recently and, in many cases, they were surprised at how many different creative and cultural experiences that they’d actually had.”

“We then discussed the importance of libraries as a focus, not just for reading and research, but also for local cultural information. We asked them to consider where their local library was and visit it to see what music-related information they could find out.” This thinking ranged from performance adverts, to books and other publications on music-related topics.

The young people recorded this



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The project transformed the children into architects. They researched, explored and imagined how Reading was in the past, and how it might look in the future.

Kate Powell, Jelly

through a Find Out activity – a profile of a musician or performer that interested them – ideally someone who had recently visited the local area, or would be over the coming months. They then shared their projects with others, whilst summarising their recent creative experiences and looking at what they would like to get involved in next.

The progress of the Band Experience was celebrated at a December 2017 concert – The Jazz Café at The Madejski Stadium. “This performance was the most varied yet”, Kate says. “It featured Band Experience performances, solo singers, some guest bands, plus performances from Reading Girls School pupils.”

Successes

In working towards Arts Award Explore, the team at Jelly were able to revisit children they had worked with previously, as part of an Artsworld-supported Discover project, ROOM. They were excited to go back and see how things had progressed since. “Although there had been a few changes in the class, the pupils remembered it well and were incredibly excited about going on to the next level of Arts Award”, Kate says. “This kind of continuation is so valuable to embedding the enthusiasm for arts and creativity at a young age.” She continues, “We have had hugely encouraging feedback from the teachers regarding the visits to local libraries and we want to



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The Rock Academy

encourage them to use them as a valuable local resource in the future.”

Of the children’s responses, Kate says, “The visits were brilliantly informative and engaging, and they didn’t want to leave! We believe the libraries around Reading have a huge amount to offer in terms of culture and opening up access to culture. Working with them to offer the Arts Award scheme should really raise their profile and help sustain them for future generations.” It’s important too, that educators don’t forget the role libraries can play in school work. “Reminding them that libraries are excellent primary resources for school work is key, and has been for this project too”, Kate explains.

“We also cite communication as a success – having built relationships with the schools previously, engaging them in this project was a simple process.” This, she feels illustrates the importance of maintaining a strong network with schools. “That consistent communication is paramount.”

Suzan Davies, the Children’s Lead at Reading Libraries trained as an Arts Award Discover and Explore adviser as part of the project. “We loved working on the Our Town project with Jelly, helping children from Oxford Road Community School and Redlands Primary School to achieve their Explore Arts Award. It was the first time we’d taken part in Arts Award, so it was a new experience for staff and pupils alike”, she explains.

“We devised sessions where the children looked at maps of old Reading, books with drawings and pictures of old Reading buildings, and viewed historical illustrations and photographs online. The

children particularly enjoyed seeing the streets where they live today as they were when the houses were first built.” This sense of connection to history acted as inspiration for the pupils. Library staff encouraged them to draw their favourite buildings in their sketchbooks as a response to their learning.

“We would like to build on these sessions, and we’re now planning a ‘twilight’ sessions for local schools that will highlight the valuable resources we hold in our Local Studies Library. We want to show teachers how to access them and use them to deliver the curriculum.”

Suzan found the training very helpful too. “It was a great opportunity to share ideas with assessors from many different backgrounds. Hearing how teachers and other local authorities had utilised the Reading Agency’s Summer Reading Challenge to deliver Arts Award was very interesting as well.”

Challenges

Working with a wide range of backgrounds and diverse needs brought with it its own set of challenges for the project partners. “We faced behavioural challenges that were somewhat unexpected, and it was difficult for some children to engage in the programme”, explains Kate. “This is simply how state primary schools in urban areas can be, and even though it was a challenge, we embraced and celebrated it too. However, engaging some of the children in even the small amount of reflection required for Arts Award Explore was hard work.”



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Timing presented an issue too. "Although we allocated the required amount of time to each class, I think that in the future, we will have to allow even more artist lead time, to really give each child the chance to get the absolute most out of the programme."

As with previous projects, persuading schools to take on Artsmark proved something of a challenge. "In spite of the excellent work that the children have done and the positive feedback from teachers, the schools in general weren't forthcoming about applying for Artsmark status. In spite of our best efforts, they do not see the direct benefit to their school. We continue to try and persuade them differently!"

Learning

Jelly staff are very happy with the connections they've been able to make through working collaboratively with other organisations, explains Kate. "Being able to work jointly with The Rock Academy whilst focusing on different delivery methods has been great. Sharing resources and information is so beneficial and we will

continue to work with this in mind for future projects."

The Rock Academy provided positive feedback from the process too. Although tutors already closely monitored the young people's progress, introducing Arts Award made a noticeable difference, says Founder, Pete Doyle. "The first section of the Arts Award booklet allowed the young people to realise the different active and audience arts experiences they'd had over the past 6-12 months. This was positive both for them and for our tutors too."

"We have included Arts Award as part of previous engagement with young people, as it's a great, tangible way to celebrate creative output and experience. Engagement with this project has further emphasised how positive this can be for the participants and for us at the Academy. We plan use this approach with future Award-related projects."

Jelly are keen to keep learning from their

Thanks for all your enthusiasm and for giving the children such an amazing experience.

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Ally Boothright, Year 4 Teacher, Redlands Primary School

experiences too, and are examining how making small changes might strengthen future efforts.

Future Initiatives

“We hope that we have enlightened schools to the need for this kind of work”, says Kate. “We want to encourage them to implement these approaches in their own teaching, and to use Reading Libraries in the future too.” She continues: “There is an ongoing need for this work, and especially at Primary level. Working with partners to engage local schools, especially those within walking distance, would be ideal.”

She believes too, that being flexible with thinking will allow for more potential opportunities to connect children and young people to arts and culture. “The work that we have started in this project could be extended and continued as a Discover in a Day programme, potentially after school, or at weekend clubs.”

Other approaches could involve tapping into existing initiatives and competitions aimed at young people. “The libraries have a wealth of resources that could support in the delivery of a variety of programmes, including things like the *Summer Reading Challenge*, BBC Radio 2’s *500 Words* writing competition, theatrical performances in libraries, and visual arts programmes for all ages.”

On the subject of progression routes for the children the project has engaged with, Kate says, “Jelly would like to continue to follow the children that we have worked with, to apply for further funding to progress them on to Explore, Bronze and Silver levels of Arts Award in a few years’ time.”

Kate adds, “The young people who worked with The Rock Academy are leaving not only with a recognised Arts Award qualification, but with valuable performance experience that will steer them into suitable work experience or on to future qualifications.”

*Case study by Laura Smith, Communications Writer,
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*Taken from a Project Evaluation by Kate Powell, Jelly,
Reading*