**Driving Inspiration Celebration Day**

Driving Inspiration is a collaboration between disabled artists, Paralympians and disabled and non-disabled young people. The Paralympic Handover day at Stoke Mandeville on 17 September 2008 rode on the back of a pilot phase which saw a series of events happening across Buckinghamshire in four focus schools through 2008/09.

Since then, with added funding from accentuate through 2010/11, the project has grown to accommodate 14 schools across the south east region, working with 12 disabled artists and 10 disabled sports people. (576 young people with over 60% with disabilities making work, and 6115 participating in assemblies, interviews and watching performances/exhibitions)

 On 14th July Mandeville School played host to a massive celebration of the work produced to date, with exhibitions, performances and workshops giving 350 students from the 14 schools who have taken part an incredible opportunity to get an idea of the breadth and excitement that has been generated by Driving Inspiration.

 I arrive just after 9am. There is a tremendous energy. I am overwhelmed by the enthusiasm of the host school. I am planning to work with students from the 14 schools across the south east to give them an opportunity to blog about their impressions of the project (which were published on DAO); what they’ve learnt from taking part in the workshops; what they get out of the day itself. Brian Dipple presents me with a small interview room with a couple of computers at my disposal and an assistant Katie who is allocated the job of rounding up teachers and students to take part.

 Driving Inspiration under the directorship of Vicky Hope-Walker and the dynamic engagement with a host of disabled artists [Gary Thomas, Signdance Collective, Rachel Gadsden, Caroline Cardus, Lynn Weddle, Anya Ustaszewski, Jack Fletcher, David Bunting, Suzanne Kennedy, Jon Adams, Mark Smith, Christine Wilkinson and Clinton Osborne] has managed to inject a massive amount of good will into the programme. I talk to students, teachers and artists and all convey a sense that Driving Inspiration is leaving a lasting legacy behind in the south east. The program has created opportunities for the schools to work in partnership in bringing a wide range of arts and sports disciplines together.

 For many of the non-disabled students, this is their first time of being in contact with disabled people. They talk about their surprise at seeing how ‘able’ we are. One typical comment I receive from a young lad seems to sum up a lot of what the program has been about: “You don’t have to treat [disabled people] like you feel sorry for them or anything. You can treat them like a normal person.” On one day last week in the Sun Newspaper, there were no less than 3 headlines representing disability as something tragic and brave. The standfirsts talked about having to beat disability; about disabled people as ‘special’ on one hand and as reprehensible on the other. With Driving Inspiration divides of all kinds, in terms of age, disability and race, are being crossed, as collaborations are formed and partnerships made. The kind of stereotypes the media love to promulgate will be redundant in years to come, certainly for those exposed to Driving Inspiration.

 I speak to one of the teachers – Kat from Beaconsfield School who explains to me how working with Caroline Cardus and Rachel Gadsden has impacted on her work with students at an arts centre at Beaconsfield School called the Lemon Wedge: “I think what’s been interesting is that the project is that has given the children the chance to learn practical things about the Paralympics but also about wider issues about how people develop resilience and adapt to their circumstances. It has been an eye opener at different times and has been really useful in turns of their learning.”

 Kat saw it as an opportunity to get year 10 sports ambassadors and a mixture of year 7, 8 and 9 students to work together. It was a unique chance to traverse age barriers, as well as preconceptions about disability; in order to get students to learn more about each other and themselves. The groups created a wonderful series of large artworks, mapping their bodies, using textures, patterns and symbol as a way of saying something about themselves. “When Vicky explained the project to us, we saw that it fitted in nicely with the way that we work at the centre. We are always happy to have different artists come in and saw there was an opportunity here to create partnership and collaboration, across schools, across ages, and across disability.”

 The students presented a proposal to the Head teacher to take snapshots from the artwork. The idea was approved and the plan now is to turn the body maps into a series of 14 printed banners, which are going to be installed in the school gym and the sports hall at Beaconsfield School.

 I talk to several of the artists over the course of the day. Film-maker Gary Thomas is working nearby. Throughout the day he is showing examples of films he has produced on a loop near the school entrance, as well as taking more film footage with the help of two students, as the day progresses. Gary is equally enthusiastic about the way his work has been received: “I made a film in a day at Oak Green School in October 2010. Everyone wanted to have a go at learning how to use the camera. I was able to get three students involved in working with Finalcut Pro learning editing skills. Pent Valley School also had several students with some knowledge of the software who helped in the editing process.” In all Gary made 11 films working with 42 students from eleven schools. His focus was to teach camera skills so the students could then film footage of all the workshops with artists and sports people, which he could then edit to make the final films.

As the day progresses I find myself attempting to be in several spaces at once; viewing the artwork and talking to the students and artists. It is an impossible exercise. There is so much to see and do. I decide to do what I can and let the day flow. I wander into a Signdance Theatre International performance with students from Pent Valley School. About 15 or so students, mixed ages; disabled and non-disabled are throwing themselves into dancing to a series of sequences of improvised electric guitar playing.  The music moves from fast and frenetic to slow and reflective. The movements mirror the sound. There are sequences with drumming and clapping, thrown into the mix, as well as projections of images made in collaboration with Lyn Weddle. They throw themselves from one end of the performance space to the other; pick each other up in a series of choreographed movements. It’s a revelation to see that nearly half the students are boys. They are thoroughly enjoying themselves.

I talk to Jacob Casselden a 24 year old dancer who has been working with Signdance for the last four months. He is very enthusiastic about the experience of bringing disabled and non-disabled students together to work with a combination of sign language, live music, dance and drama: “The students had no ounce of confidence before they started and now they love dancing. They love physical theatre. They’ve realised they can create a picture using their own bodies and its fantastic to watch.”

  I ask Jacob if there was one bit of advice about his career that he would pass on to the students they are working with: “Being born deaf I have done so many things that other deaf people wouldn’t believe. I would say you have to ignore what others say; follow your heart not your head. In dance there’s no such thing as right and wrong. You have to do what you feel inspired to do; interpret dance in the way that appeals to you. There is no such thing as perfect dancing; it is about moving in the way you feel inspired.”

It is clear that everyone is working full-on to get the most out of the day. Later, I find out that Cressex Community College and Bucks Primary School have also been through Signdance workshops.

Wandering further afield I find Jon Adams working in one of the side classrooms in preparation for making a field of flags with students. He says that everyone who has sat down at the table has wanted to be engaged with the activity. It’s something about the simplicity of the process; taking a stick and piece of paper and making a flag, as you might do at the seaside in the process of making a sandcastle. Jon says that “a lot of kids won’t join in on an arts project because they’re frightened that they will be judged on their drawing skills. With this they’ve actually made something. They’re proud of being part of something. I’m bowled over by how good the response has been. Mostly they’ll compete and see how many flags they can create.”

Jon uses books for the workshops which would otherwise be pulped. So for him it about saving some aspect of the written word that would otherwise be destroyed and turning it into another art object. I question him a bit about what the flags mean. He talks about them as non-sectarian; a universal symbol which says something about being an individual who is part of a collective. For my own part I am impressed by the photos Jon has produced of his Fields of Flags which form some of the final documentation of the work.

Jon also shows me aspects of other work he has been engaged with, working with the schools on Driving Inspiration. I am deeply impressed by one very large drawing which has been made into a banner, which is on display in one of the gyms. Jon showed year 9 students from Bittern Park school (Southampton) how to make a geological map of their day. The piece on display contains some beautiful drawing. Its coloured grading system represents the ‘feel’ of what happened during each part of the artists’ day. It’s like a visual diary and I see lots of potential for creating a body of work around this idea.

Towards the end of the day I ask sound artist Anya Ustaszewski what Driving Inspiration has meant to her: “It’s been very useful to have had the chance to talk to students about disability. I had a pretty lousy time at school. If disability was spoken about at all it was euphemistically.  It was always in terms of being ‘the special needs kids from the special needs unit.’ This project has given me an angle on how attitudes have changed; how much more open you can be with children in talking frankly about disability.”

Anya mirrors some of the other things I’ve heard about the value of working across artforms; across ages with disabled and non-disabled students. She talks about it in terms of “washing away” the kinds of conventions she challenges in her work: “I get people to think about sound in an emotional way. My work is about how we make music without using conventional instruments.”

In writing this blog I realise I’ve only been able to scratch the surface of the immensity of the programme of work that has been taking place across Driving Inspiration. I’ve mentioned only a small portion of the activity taking place on the day itself. Aside from photographic workshops led by Lyn Weddle and printmaking workshops led by Christine Wilkinson, there were a whole host of sports activities taking place with Paralympians, (Naomi Riches – Rowing, Claire Harvey – Sitting Volleyball, Louise Sugden – Basketball, John Harris – Discus.

A big achievement of Driving Inspiration has been the cross curricular format the programme has developed.  It is exciting, and conveys a sense of how the real world works. Things don’t happen in isolation; cut into segments in the way that education works conventionally. Here students are learning about how one thing leads to another. So for example a music score created in one series of workshops, inspired art-making in another set of workshops. The music and art were then used as a starting point for choreography with dance students. And finally T-shirts were printed of two of the central images worn by the dancers.

It has been a very positive if chaotic day. With the vast numbers of young people in attendance how could it be any other way. It is clear that all the students I’ve worked with have enjoyed the art and sports activities. They have also taken on board some real-life experience of how impairment impacts on individuals lives, in the process. There may or may not be revelations, but it is a starting point for breaking down the fear that difference engenders. Driving Inspiration is having a big impact and will continue to be a unique opportunity to give schools the chance to engage with disabled artists and break through some of taboos.