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Perspectives on Practice:
Virtually There: a Process of Collaboration

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Summary:

This paper considers aspects of art-education project *Virtually There*, looking at artist-teacher collaboration, how it works and what it means for children.

Abstract:

This paper introduces action research on *Virtually There*, a long-running project placing artists in schools through the interactive whiteboard and in close collaboration with teachers. It considers questions of organisational and relational structure, the operation of the project through time and process, and the meaning of success in this context.

Key words: art education; collaboration; relationship; time; process.

Virtually There

BRYONIE REID

Introduction

Virtually There is a long-running project managed by Sligo-based Kids' Own Publishing Partnership (Kids' Own) in schools in Northern Ireland. I have been engaged in action research on it since 2017. The project is framed around close collaboration between artists and teachers to engage children in high-quality contemporary art practice as learners and doers. *Virtually There* began in 2006 with an idea from Kids' Own associate artist Ann Henderson. Living on Rathlin Island, off Northern Ireland's north coast, she was exploring ways to continue collaborative working with teacher Judith White, based some 90 miles away near Banbridge in County Down. Having worked with Kids' Own before, the pair suggested to its then Creative Director, Orla Kenny, that they and the organisation could develop a project in which Ann co-convened sessions with Judith virtually, using webcams and the classroom's interactive whiteboard.

Kids' Own describes itself as working 'in defence of children's right to culture [and to] a space to express themselves through the arts', and one of its main aims is to make visible and validate children's creative expression. Projects are designed with 'an ethos of social justice', and many involve children from diverse and marginalised backgrounds (Kids' Own, n.d.). Ann and Judith's proposal fitted well with Kids' Own's core purpose of facilitating artists and children to work together. It also built on earlier, similar Kids' Own projects that took place in the physical rather than virtual realm. Orla received the idea enthusiastically and devoted a considerable proportion of her immense energy to developing the project, sourcing funding, recruiting for further artist-teacher partnerships and, as an artist herself, closely mentoring the artists' practices in *Virtually There*.

Until the 2016 - 2017 academic year, the project was funded solely by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) through National Lottery Fund money. During that year, Kids' Own secured a four-year More and Better grant from

Virtually There

BRYONIE REID

the Paul Hamlyn Foundation (PHF) to fund an expanded version of *Virtually There*. Meanwhile, ACNI continued what had always been year-by-year project funding for one more academic year (2017 - 2018). The PHF grant enabled *Virtually There* to grow to involve eight schools and nine artist-teacher partnerships. It guaranteed three consecutive years of engagement between artists, teachers and children, with a fourth year of dissemination. It funded reflection and relationship-building time for artists and teachers, paying artists and providing substitute teaching cover for teachers; and it paid for my action research.

When I began this research in 2017, it was clear to me that I was not being asked for an evaluation; not being asked to judge to what extent *Virtually There* had succeeded (or not), according to agreed criteria. Rather, I was being asked to meet, listen to and observe artists, teachers and children in each of the eight schools, to develop my own in-depth understanding of how the project worked and how it was experienced by all participants. As current Creative Director Jo Holmwood explains, the action research was seen by Kids' Own as an opportunity to 'interrogat[e] the impact of this work – independently – so that we had an evidence base underpinning [it], rather than talking to its value from an anecdotal and subjective point of view'. *Virtually There* comes to an end in March 2020, with an exhibition of project work and the launch of the action research report.

In this paper I share some aspects of my two years' research more fully explored in my report (Reid, 2020). In the first year, I spoke to all artists and teachers individually, and some children, as well as observing *Virtually There* sessions in each school. I also read available literature on the relationships between art, education and technology. In the second year, I focused on three partnerships in two schools (artist Ann Henderson works separately with two teachers and two classes in Ballydown Primary School in County Down), observing further sessions, having further conversations, speaking

Virtually There

BRYONIE REID

repeatedly to child participants, speaking also to principals and education sector professionals. During this time, I continued my wider reading. The project is multi-dimensional, but to fit in the context of this journal I limit my exploration to questions of structure, operation and 'success' in *Virtually There*.

Structure: organisational and relational

The structure of *Virtually There* may be viewed in two ways. First, there is the organisational structure: the varied roles of Kids' Own, artists, teachers and schools, and the outworking of the project by sessions and cycles common to each school. Second, *Virtually There* is structured around the collaborative partnership between artist and teacher, and Kids' Own's framework is designed to facilitate that partnership. There is, therefore, a relational structure that encompasses artists, teachers and Kids' Own staff themselves.

Organisational structure

In *Virtually There*, Kids' Own facilitated artists and teachers (and schools) to connect and work collaboratively. Kids' Own staff designed the project's structure, and obtained and administered funding for it. Kids' Own provided mentorship and facilitated planning and reflection time for all participants. Kids' Own also framed the nature and limits of artist-teacher time together (for example, funded a specific number of hours and required that a proportion of hours be spent on contact with children, a proportion on planning and a proportion on reflection). The Kids' Own website hosts the project journals, populated with images and text by artists, teachers and children. While Kids' Own 'owns' the project, the work produced within the project is 'owned' by its makers: the artists and children (and occasionally teachers).

In developing the initial idea presented by Ann and Judith, Kids' Own took responsibility for inviting schools to participate. Where a school had previously demonstrated interest in collaborative work, Kids' Own approached

Virtually There

BRYONIE REID

the principal directly. Other schools responded to open calls to join the project. When a teacher committed to *Virtually There*, Kids' Own presented its school agreement to the principal. This laid out what each school could expect to receive and to give in terms of its participation in *Virtually There*. Among the eight schools involved, some principals brought the project to their teachers, and some teachers brought the project to their principals. The two principals to whom I spoke were very conscious of the benefits to their staff and pupils of the artists' time and expertise, and especially the funding. There was little to no financial outlay required from the schools.

Virtually There took place through a series of sessions (between ten and fourteen, depending on funding) in each academic year, known as a cycle. A framing idea for any given cycle was agreed by artist and teacher before the new academic year began, though this was held provisionally, with artists and teachers prepared to shape the cycle session by session according to the children's responses to the ideas, methods and materials introduced. On one or two of the sessions in each cycle, artists visited the school in person. Teachers tended to set aside a substantial amount of time for each session, ranging from the whole morning to the whole school day. For teachers, *Virtually There* sessions represented 'freedom' or 'relief' from the close planning required from them in their usual classroom practice, intended to achieve pre-set outcomes. Teachers made it clear to me that children benefited from this freedom too, not least because they were empowered to shape the processes they engaged in and decide on what outcomes (if any) they would produce. From initial concerns about the time they were *not* spending on numeracy and literacy, teachers participating in *Virtually There* became confident that every session provided 'good education', both fulfilling and exceeding curricular requirements.

Virtually There

BRYONIE REID

Relational structure

The project began with an artist and a teacher, Ann Henderson and Judith White, who had already worked together for three years. They and the Creative Director of Kids' Own, Orla Kenny, were aware of the importance of relationship in collaborative work. Orla had a 'strong sensibility' for forming partnerships, and when numbers of artists and teachers applying to get involved permitted, she made careful choices about who would work with whom. All participants in the project are clear about Orla's central role in shaping and driving it. An artist herself, she was always 'very excited' about contemporary art practice and the possibilities for enriching children's lives and education by connecting them with artists. As well as managing *Virtually There* with the Kids' Own team, she closely supported participating artists in their practices. Orla died in 2018. Her loss has been deeply felt by all who knew and worked with her, and especially sharply in this project, peopled by colleagues and friends and built around relationships.

Relationships are privileged in the project's values and structure because collaboration between teachers and artists is integral to *Virtually There*. Artists interact virtually with teacher and children during sessions, via software and the interactive whiteboard. Planning is by phone or online, and teachers and artists are in the same space only two or three times in each cycle. Some artists live and work at a considerable distance from the school they are involved with, while others live and work nearby. However, the use of the virtual is not only about overcoming distance. For artist Ann Donnelly, with a virtual connection, the teacher is as important as the artist. The artist arrives online, Ann says, not with 'stuff' but with 'ideas'; 'these ideas have to be communicated, and the teacher is the partner in communication'. This leads to a much deeper level of engagement between artist and teacher, and between teacher and project. As artist Lisa Cahill puts it, the teacher becomes 'the artist in the room'. In this way, the virtual framework demands collaboration, and effective collaboration demands a close working

Virtually There

BRYONIE REID

relationship. Kids' Own were aware that trust is key when artist and teacher are working together and one partner is present only virtually, and the organisation made significant efforts to enable that trust to develop. A recent innovation arising from the PHF grant was paid reflection time. For the first time, artists were paid and teachers were released from teaching (by a funded substitute teacher) to take time together in each cycle. Known as an Away Day, the purpose of this time was to recognise artists' and teachers' need to develop and maintain their relationship and to find ways to talk and do without aiming for an outcome (in contrast to their dedicated planning time).

How does *Virtually There* operate?

Although *Virtually There* varies in its outworkings in each school, according to the artists' practices, the teachers' practices, their relationship and the input of the children, year by year, there are certain elements common to all outworkings. These include taking time and engaging wholeheartedly in process.

Time

Time given to artists and teachers to spend together outside of the period of contact in the classroom has cemented relationships, and participants testify that the work has flourished as a result. Artist Ann Donnelly explains about her *Virtually There* partner, teacher Marcella Wilson, 'I trust her completely that no matter what happened in the classroom, we'd find a way through it'. Ann Henderson indicates that the trust and closeness she has built up with the two Ballydown Primary School teachers she partners with in *Virtually There*, Judith White and Julie Orr, allow them to introduce seemingly 'off-the-cuff' activities and to circumvent technological difficulties in any given session. Their mutual trust means that Ann will listen to Judith and Julie's assessment of the children's energy levels or understanding; while Judith and Julie will allow Ann to push them and the children into new territory, both

Virtually There

BRYONIE REID

conceptually and practically. Teacher Leanne Kyle points out that time has to be spent in getting and continuing to know the artist the teacher partners with:

[I]f you're not doing it [on an Away Day], it's in your own time, and sometimes that can be very difficult... Just to have the space to chat, even, is nice... Because we have to foster a relationship – if we're going to foster it with the kids we need to foster it with each other as well, so it's nice to have the space to do that... the freedom.

Teachers speak too about the wider benefits for them of this structure, that prioritises their relationship with the artist, supports reflection and values their time. For Judith:

It's so refreshing, and you get so much out of it... because school is busy... and you don't get that chance to sit back and think about what you're doing, how valuable it is, and what the kids have got out of it, and... what you've got out of it, and even at times what went wrong.

Julie Orr agrees that the gift of time is a significant one. Discussing what are known as Sharing Days, when the whole project team gather to reflect and plan, she suggests:

[It makes you] enthused again, about what you're doing... Because the project is hard work, it's a big time commitment... There is a lot of time that we make, ourselves, outside school hours, in order to make the project work. But we're happy to do that because [we know it is good for the children]. The fact that there are those days and there is that time, it just helps keep everything continuing on.

It is clear from participants' reflections that while the virtual nature of the project foregrounds collaboration, that collaboration between artists and teachers would not work without building trust through spending time together.

Virtually There

BRYONIE REID

Process

Taking time is built into *Virtually There* for other reasons than relationship-building. While mainstream education tends to be shaped around pre-defined outcomes, the work of each collaborative partnership prioritises process.

Outcomes are never pre-determined, but arise organically as a natural corollary of process, if at all. Although children participating in *Virtually There* make recognisable artwork – drawings, sculptures, photographs, films - much of the time these are made as *part of the process* of exploring ideas, and not the culmination. Drawings, objects and documentation are tools more often than finished products. In fact, artist Andrew Livingstone and teacher Vanessa Patton have engaged children in deliberate dismantling of outcomes, foregrounding the power of process and experience. Ann Donnelly suggests that ‘process is an artform’, and this is part of what artists can offer teachers and children in *Virtually There*. Teacher Marcella Wilson indicates, ‘our training moulds us [in one way] and the creative and expressive side is [the other way] and they’re poles apart’. Participants suggest that dwelling in process gives children agency: they are empowered to shape that process, rather than being hurried through a set series of tasks to reach a desired outcome, as teacher Stella Cross notes is increasingly common in formal education in school.

Further, Away Days and Sharing Days are substantially shaped around process, reflecting the structure of the contact time with children and indicating the integrity of the methodology. Time spent is not judged by outcomes achieved. Julie Orr explains, ‘it was nice to be in that... explorer situation... we were the ones... trying things out’. Judith White adds that Kids’ Own ‘know that when you slow things down, when you take your time, when you have that freedom to talk, they know that there’s value in that’.

Virtually There

BRYONIE REID

What might ‘success’ mean in relation to *Virtually There*?

‘Success’ is a problematic concept in *Virtually There*, and yet it is clear that any long-running educational project should be carefully evaluated in terms of what it is doing, year-by-year, for its adult and child participants. In designing this action research, I made a choice to prioritise storytelling over data collection. My methodology is based on semi-structured interviews with artists and teachers (at least one per participant) and conversations with children. I have avoided attempting to measure the effects of the project on children participating in it – which risks instrumentalising and reducing art’s value – preferring rather to share project experiences in their richness and complexity, as told to me. Anne Bamford’s 2006 research, which examines the place of arts in education policy internationally, suggests that while ‘bad’ art education can negatively affect children’s creativity, ‘good’ art education has positive outcomes for children, educationally, culturally and socially (2006, p.4). In a broad and global exploration, Bamford ventures to define features of ‘good’ art education, providing a framework against which to consider *Virtually There*. For her, good art education includes collaborative partnerships with arts professionals, privileging of process, emphasis on discussion and encouragement of experimentation and risk-taking (2006, pp9-10). It is clear that *Virtually There* not only answers to Bamford’s concept of success, but also exceeds it.

However, no criteria of ‘success’ or ‘failure’ were applied by either Kids’ Own or schools to *Virtually There*. Principals who committed their staff and pupils to the project accepted that the professional expertise of artists guided its outworking, and that everything the children did with artist and teacher constituted learning. With an inherently fluid framework and no set outcomes, it would be difficult to determine whether any one activity was a ‘success’ or a ‘failure’ in crude terms. If a ‘failure’ with a particular material or technique led to fruitful reflection or triggered a creative solution, for example, it could as easily be termed a success. For Kids’ Own and participating artists and

Virtually There

BRYONIE REID

teachers, if the idea of ‘success’ had any traction in *Virtually There*, it was in the effective functioning of the collaborative partnership between artist and teacher, the space allowed for their creative practice to flourish and the time they had to give to the children with whom they worked.

Teachers testify to the effects of *Virtually There*. They speak of their enjoyment of their work within the project. They speak of its effects on children struggling with literacy and numeracy, who grow in confidence through project work which cannot be right or wrong, alongside nurturing and supportive dialogue with an artist who knows them only through their artwork and their conversation. They speak of its effects on children achieving all that is expected of them academically, but averse to risk-taking and open-ended questions, who grow in confidence through project work which is experimental and fluid and encourages agency. Artists too testify to its effects. They speak of the ‘lovely energy’ of collaboration with teacher and children, which contrasts with the ‘huge superficiality’ of the world of showing and selling work. They speak of the opportunity to deepen and broaden their work through stimulating exchange. They speak of the way in which working with children can ground their practice.

Conclusion

I will leave the final words here to child participants. Ann Henderson says, of her thirteen-year experience of working with children in *Virtually There*, ‘so many times I’m just reminded that any... limitations we set as adults, we’re often proved wrong when we bring it back to the kids’. When I ask Year Fives at Ballydown Primary School to describe Ann and her practice, Ella tells me, ‘she looks at things and how they change, after a while’, while Lexie explains that ‘she does different things’, and Evie clarifies, ‘more interesting things’, than other people do. While artists and teachers are key to the project, and clearly benefit and derive fulfilment from it, the purpose of their collaboration is not only to gain from their work with children, but, of course, to give. These

Virtually There

BRYONIE REID

children's definitions of creative practice – visual or otherwise – are as open-ended and perceptive as any I know, and demonstrate something of the thoughtful, powerful, process-focused learning in which they and others have been engaged, and by which they have been enriched, through *Virtually There*.

Bryonie Reid is a writer and artist whose work explores identity and belonging in relation to place. She works independently and as a member of quarto (www.quartocollective.com) in the field of community engagement with place and the past. She has published several journal papers and in 2011 she co-authored *Partitioned Lives: the Irish Borderlands* with Catherine Nash and Brian Graham. Artwork arising from border research, (re)writing, was exhibited in The Dock in Carrick-on-Shannon in 2012. She showed *the disappeared*, an installation of drawings and photographs, exploring colonialism in relation to family histories and geographies in Limerick City Gallery of Art in 2013. Her recent publications include 'The Elephant in the Room: Colonialism and Postcolonialism in Northern Ireland' in *Historical Geography* (2014) and 'Trying Identities: Roger Casement and Erskine Childers' in *The Irish Review* (2017). Her most recent collaborative artwork *Holding Together*, looking at memory, family histories and archives, was on show in the Public Records Office in Belfast in Autumn 2019 - Spring 2020.

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Virtually There

BRYONIE REID

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