

Inclusive learning: art, communication and a student with autism

Gareth D Morewood and **Alexandra Glew** describe work they have done with a Year 8 student who has autism and its significance for developing an inclusive learning environment

Robert (his name has been changed to protect confidentiality) is a Year 8 student with autism at Priestnall School. This article focuses on his communication needs in relation to accessing the curriculum and draws conclusions we hope will be of help to other schools.

The article summarises a small part of an inclusive learning assignment written as part of a PGCE course by Alexandra Glew while on placement in the art department at Priestnall School. Like many schools, Priestnall has a number of PGCE students on placement during the year. Often this provides exciting opportunities to develop specific interests and further explore concepts and ideas that the busy SENCO rarely has time to investigate.

Robert is part of the school's nurture group. He spent most of Year 7 developing receptive and expressive language skills and working on supportive strategies using his considerable artistic strengths, across other areas of the curriculum (which is extremely challenging for him).

He was going out to mainstream art lessons, taught by Alexandra, and also had personal, learning and thinking skill (PLTS) sessions taught by Gareth Morewood, director of curriculum support at the school, within the nurture group.

The emphasis of this case study is on Alexandra's observation of language use and Robert's interaction in different learning contexts. This was to provide more specific information in supporting

Priestnall school

Priestnall is an 11-16 secondary school in Heaton Mersey, Stockport. It has a truly comprehensive intake, with students from a range of backgrounds and a mix of children with a variety of additional needs. After an inspection looking at the outcomes of vulnerable groups of learners in 2008, Ofsted found the school 'outstanding' for support and guidance. The school also has an Arts Mark Gold commendation award for the quality of its provision in the fields of art, music, dance and drama.

Robert directly, but also to further inform and evolve provision across the school.

Bespoke timetable

Robert follows a bespoke timetable as part of the philosophy of personalising provision established over the last decade at Priestnall School (Morewood, 2008). This means that he:

- has individual tutorials
- has attended dedicated language and communication, skill development and motor skills sessions, and
- goes to a combination of mainstream classes (art and technology were two of the first, during Year 7).

For children with autism, the ability to learn depends on visually appealing materials. Alexandra considered that in her teaching, the use of visually stimulating materials in the classroom supported not only the

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development of children on the autistic spectrum, but the development of *all* the children in her classes. This is an observation vigorously supported by Gareth and contextualised by Bamford (2003), who argues that 'the proliferation of images means that visual literacy is now crucial for obtaining information, constructing knowledge and building successful educational outcomes.'

Autism and art

Alexandra suggested that successful educational outcomes are accessible to all types of learners through successful teaching of art. Students with autism are encouraged to meet targets relating to the development of communication skills in verbal and written forms. Martin (2009) also states the significance which art can have on meeting the goals for children with autism:

'Art projects are infinite in kind and number and can be created to address any goal, including goals that are often significant

areas of concern for children with autism spectrum disorder, such as communication, reading, sequencing, socialisation, and flexibility.'

According to Martin, children with autism should be encouraged to answer questions, develop abstract thinking and express thoughts and feelings. These targets can be met through opportunities to imagine and communicate through visual form and read and interpret images. While this work extended into a series of lessons entitled 'Fantastic Doorways', the focus here is about the communication of Robert within the different environments and sessions.

Observing and recording

Alexandra made observations in a range of learning environments in addition to the mainstream Year 8 art lessons which she taught. These included:

- a motor skills session which was developed and delivered by one of the strand managers (see Morewood, 2009)
- a resistant materials lesson, which took place in the technology department of the school but was not a mainstream class (it was part of the nurture group timetable)
- a PLTS session which took place in the nurture group classroom.
- a mainstream history lesson.

While observing Robert in the different learning contexts, Alexandra took detailed notes with regard to his IEP targets, communication and interactions.

Alexandra describes her findings:

'I observed that Robert was most communicative when asked direct questions by his teacher or peers, or when he was given a direct, explicit instruction. During the motor skills session, I discovered that Robert was engaged in the lesson's content only when he was in direct communication with the teacher and performing the task. At other times during this practical session the learning was completely passive and non-participatory.'

'During my observations of an activity which took place during the history lesson, I felt that Robert's needs might have been

better served through teaching strategies involving clearer and more concise questioning and the use of ICT systems in the classroom. I have found the use of PowerPoint (with images and pictures to assist with visual learning) can present students with clear, lasting information and is very accessible not only to visual learners, but supports the learning of all (see Bamford, 2003). Careful use of the questioning of students about expectations and objectives, if done during the introductory part of the lesson, would have ensured all students were clear about these expectations, especially Robert.

'Throughout the PLTS lesson, Robert communicated more confidently. It was clear from the monitoring that a significant factor in this is being in a familiar environment [the nurture room] with a small, recognisable group of students [the nurture group]. It was notable that the lesson was taught by a familiar individual (the director of curriculum support) who has played a significant role in Robert's development at the school. It is probable that this is one of the main factors for his enjoyment and the ease of communication recorded with peers and the teacher alike. He answered questions, initiated communication on many occasions with others and gave a positive input to the lesson following regular direct questioning by the teacher. This session showed a significant difference in Robert's presentation, specifically in regard to communication and language use.'

The data gathered was extensive and further opportunities to develop the findings of this research will be explored. Using art as enhanced visual stimuli for learning and understanding should not be seen merely as providing visual prompts for those with needs on the autistic spectrum. The work concluded that in providing detailed visual imagery to provide a balance between visual and textual literacy in the classroom, coupled with direct questioning and carefully structured tasks, all students benefit, not only Robert.

Personal thoughts

Alexandra found that that art, design and craft can play an important part in creating an inclusive learning environment. She discovered the significance that the subject can have on the development and inclusion of autistic students – that art and design can broaden social skills, create resources that support autistic students in expressing thoughts and feelings, and allow them a chance to develop control and skill by

Inclusion: desire, passion and process

Gareth Morewood reflects on Alexandra's work:

Alexandra's work has supported me with my developing and constantly evolving understanding of inclusion:

- **Inclusion** is a **process**, not a 'state'.
- The aim of this process is to obtain '**utopia**'; even if many argue that it is, ultimately unobtainable.
- This aim is born from **desire** and **passion** for change; not simply working towards pre-agreed, measurable outcomes.
- **Inclusion** is personal, and therefore, by definition, has to be a **personalised process**. Educational agendas (Children's Plan, 2007; Every Child Matters, 2004; Gilbert Review, 2006; Further Education White Paper, 2006; Leitch Review of Skills, 2006 and World Class Skills, 2007) all endorse the concepts of personalisation and the learner's right to have a voice.
- It cannot be measured against a single instrument; degrees of success and achievement span numerous areas which form a complex mesh of success, ultimately no 'measure' can account for success.
- **Inclusion** is about desire and passion, *not* about results and tables of statistics.

As I continue to search for 'utopia', I take great heart from the next generation of teachers possessing research skills and teaching techniques like those explored through Alexandra's placement at Priestnall. Searching for a better balance is always difficult, but this work strongly advocates clear visual imagery that, if supported by direct questioning and clear expectations, can allow significant progress – especially in Robert's case.

using a range of materials and processes.

Having time to investigate Robert's behaviour in other subject areas provided an insight into his preferences for learning and interaction.

In addition, Robert benefited from the opportunity to work with Alexandra on an innovative project where he had the chance to develop his motor skills in addition to language and communication skills, by experimenting in a range of media each lesson. Alexandra's approach to personalising Robert's learning, coupled with the discussion of his progress and artwork on a one-to-one basis every lesson, helped to build up the foundations of a comfortable relationship where Robert felt confident to express his ideas about his artwork and the artwork of others.

Conclusion

As stated previously, students with autism are encouraged to meet targets relating to the development of communication skills in verbal and written forms. In creating a better balance between ensuring appropriate visual representations and constructing questions that offer direct opportunities for response, Robert was included more, in every aspect of the sessions observed. None of this will be a great surprise to many readers, but how often do we look closely at the work being done in our own schools and analyse

teaching and learning techniques against individual needs of our most vulnerable learners?

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