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**THESIS**

**The local environment as a  
resource for Art Teaching**

**PTA Course 1980—81 JAMES CAULFIELD**





THE LOCAL ENVIRONMENT

AS A RESOURCE

FOR ART TEACHING.

PRINCIPALS OF TEACHING ART COURSE 1980-81.

JAMES CAULFIELD.

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## INTRODUCTION.

" Education is wider than schooling. To be efficient it should include the pupil's general environment. It is the duty of the community to ensure that this environment is healthy"

Plato - 427-347 B.C.

My aim in writing this thesis is to consolidate my ideas, experience and knowledge in order to discuss an important aspect of my approach to Art Education.

My approach demands the use of the student's local environment as a resource for Art Teaching.

I have organised and taught projects on this theme in both second and third level.

This thesis is also in support of my major project, a three day Urban Sensory Trail in inner Dublin with Pre-Diploma students from the National College of Art and Design.

My methods and observations I will discuss in a later chapter.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTS. The importance of the environment in the development of individuals has been recognised by philosophers from Plato to Rousseau to Piaget.

Dewey (1950) like Rousseau, stressed the importance of interaction between schoolwork and locality. They believed that taking isolated facts divorced from experience was inadequate for the child's response.

It was Dewey who was responsible for implementing the project method of learning in schools. The aim of the project method was to relate learning to concrete examples.

This included group projects encompassing several subjects and it stressed the importance of selecting themes of interest to the child or adolescent. The introverted medium of learning through textbooks or quoting examples that are not within the child's experience does not help in the development of the adolescent.

Piaget comments on this subject:-

" If social co-operation is thus one of the principal formative agents in the spontaneous genesis of child thought, it is an imperative necessity for modern education to make use of this fact by according an important place to socialised activities in the classroom".



All too often students have been subjected to learning abstract concepts which they are not capable of grasping.

WHY THE LOCAL ENVIRONMENT? It is necessary to utilise the local environment particularly up to the adolescent stage. The local area provides concrete material both for working with, in the form of (found materials) and for example or demonstration. It is not divorced from the child's experience and in working on projects based on the local area (e.g. the pattern in Kilbarrack - see lesson plans.) the child slowly develops a critical view of his environment. The student also develops a sense of place or community which scarcely exists in today's suburban developments.

The local area is important also in the learning developments from adolescent stage onwards.

Apart from providing concrete experience and working material, it also develops environmental and cultural awareness.

Every age has it's own character expressed through it's own visual language. Today, more than ever, with our more relaxed aesthetic and social values we need to be critical of new developments that affect our social condition.

As Kurt Rowlands has said:-

" We no longer possess the knowledge and understanding to judge the things we make, because of this failure in judgement, we often find ourselves surrounded with such ugliness as would have horrified men of past ages".

We need a visually stimulating environment as one of the means by which our brain is exercised and our faculties trained.

City planners were concerned for quite some time about moving old established families out of their city centre communities to make room for civic buildings etc. Now they have discovered that they have created more problems by doing this.

There has been massive tightly packed and monotonous housing estates built. It is from this type of environment that my pupils come. I have experienced this at second level last year in Tallaght Community School and this year in Kilbarrack - Greendale Community School.

The third level experiences have been with Pre-Diploma students in inner Dublin, with which I did a three day sensory trail of their local area.



It is in this sphere of Urban and Suburban areas that most of the radical changes in our environment are seen.

I see project work on the local environment in these circumstances as being essential in providing the necessary format within which learning takes place.

An Art Teacher, if he is to be properly effective, has to be aware of the social/environmental background of his pupils, new educational developments and be prepared to initiate new schemes.

Therefore, in the following chapter I would like to deal briefly with the:-

1. Social and environmental changes.
2. New educational developments in Irish society today.
3. The contribution Art projects on the local environment can make.

## CHAPTER ONE.

### CHANGING SOCIAL VALUES.

Economic security seems to be the main driving force behind people today. A job is not seen as a way of life anymore but as a means of making money. In Ireland at the present, people are trying to combine an American standard of living with an Irish way of life. The Irish way of life with its older easy going pattern offers psychological security. The American standard offers all the trappings of an affluent society.

Very few people have mastered the secret of combining both. You need to be affluent to enter the affluent society, then it is just a short step to the belief that economic security is the only form there is.

### EFFECTS ON PARENTS AND CHILDREN.

Urban life has become so sophisticated that few parents are willing to just be domestics. Many of these (parents) are young and insecure and need to seek the security of a crowd.

The need for escapism or a social life inevitably involves some form of night entertainment. Singing pubs, Bingo etc. cater for this demand.

Many people seem to be chasing the comforts of life and nobody has the time to enjoy them.



The discomfort of the adult life communicates itself to the child. Many of our youth can look at nothing, see nothing without criticising it. They do so because they cannot express themselves in any other way. Children need time and this is the one thing the adult world is reluctant to give. Many parents are prepared to give their children everything except their time. It is not surprising, therefore, that so many children today are turning away from the adult world and attempting to create one of their own.

(See illustration).



Hope, aspirations and ambitions are confined to the years at school or the first few years at work. After that they enter a world in which a growing number of people find themselves frustrated, dissatisfied with their work, inactive and most important, seeming (to themselves) useless.

Teachers due to the pressures of the curriculum, have been thinking of the job to be done, rather than of the child. To develop the child's innate skills, critical faculties and an enquiring mind should be foremost in their philosophy.

" In education the child has to feel that education is teaching it something worth knowing. The spontaneous wish to learn which every normal child possesses as is evident in its efforts to walk and talk, should be the driving force in education".

Bertrand Russell.

Projects on the local area, apart from offering concrete experience, are a motivational device in themselves.





THE CHANGING PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT " The next period in our history may well be one of construction and technical progress, but all this will be of little value if we cannot learn to control the shapes and patterns which form the background of our lives. It is now more important than ever that we should learn to understand the basic laws of the world around us. The man made world and the world of nature that form the visual impact of our surroundings has a deep and lasting effect on us all".

Kurt Rowland.

This period of construction and technical progress has arrived and education needs to keep pace with the needs of society today.

As I have previously stated, most of my teaching experience has taken place in an Urban or Suburban setting. It is in this sphere that most of the radical changes in our society are easily seen.

" Any mistakes in the designing of a town are difficult to eradicate and may spell misery for a generation or more. What is worse, they may, through their damaging effect on the human organisation, so stifle or permanently distort the normal exercise of the senses, that improvements are neither demanded or initiated".

Kurt Rowland.

Projects on the local environment develop critical faculties in the student. With this comes environmental awareness and environmental protest.

TECHNOLOGY. With the developemnt of the microchip, the Trade Union Movement has taken the lead in pointing out that this new technology, if properly directed, opens up the prospect of longer holidays, reduced working hours and more leisure time.

The use of such leisure time places great challenges before the Educational System. Will that technology be used for the good of the majority of the people?

We know from experience that new technology can be an instrument of repression as well as a liberating force. Left to itself, technology develops according to it's own logic, an example of which is - if it is possible to develop bombs that will destroy the human race they will be developed.

We must intervene to make choices about technology. These choices can only be properly made when they are guided by a basic system of recognised social values, that is by culture, for example, microchip developments can be used either to create massive unemployment, lower wages, or worse working conditions or they can



provide a release of energies and time from mechanical drudgery into genuine productive activity.

The latter alternative represents both a massive challenge and a real opportunity for Art Education.

I have mentioned that these projects aid the development of Environmental and cultural awareness. Never before has the need for cultural awareness been so important. The quality of our life is going through dramatic changes. The projections for the future look even more dramatic. The onus is on the Educational System to develop the facilities within the students to cope, be critical and exemplify themselves in their fast changing environment.

EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS. The new curriculum in Primary Education in 1971 emphasises a more child centred approach and greater sensitivity to individual differences. Art and Craft were also introduced and given importance on the official curriculum. Since then there have been major curriculum developments mainly concerned with the pupil's local environment and projects suited to their needs and interests.

1. THE CITY OF DUBLIN HUMANITIES CURRICULUM PROJECT.

This is a course leading to Intermediate or Group Certificate which involves the integration of English, History, Geography and Physics.

Pupils study their local Environment (the family, area etc.) They then look at contrasting environments. They then look into contemporary issues - population, urbanisation, the world of work. Approx. 3,000 students in 20 Vocational Schools in the Dublin area.

2. THE INTEGRATED SCIENCE CURRICULUM INNOVATIONS PROJECT.  
(I.S.C.I.P.)

This course also leads to the Group and Intermediate Certificate. The emphasis is on students enquiring into the scientific nature of everyday things by experimenting rather than by rote learning. Approx. 6,000 pupils follow this course.

3. THE OUTDOOR EDUCATION PROJECT.

This project aims to develop an out of doors dimension to the curriculum. Students carry out field studies which include elements of geography, history, mathematics and physical education. 3,500 students are involved.

4. SHANNON SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES PROJECT.

The curriculum development centre at Shannon have organised a Social and Environmental studies project for eleven schools in the area. It integrates History, Civics, Geography and Biology by examining issues such as transport, goods, foods and services.



5. CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT UNIT TRINITY COLLEGE.

Founded by the city of Dublin Vocational Educational committee to develop curricula suited to the needs and interests of its pupils.

Although these projects are moving in the proper direction there is no specific mention of the contribution Art Education can make.

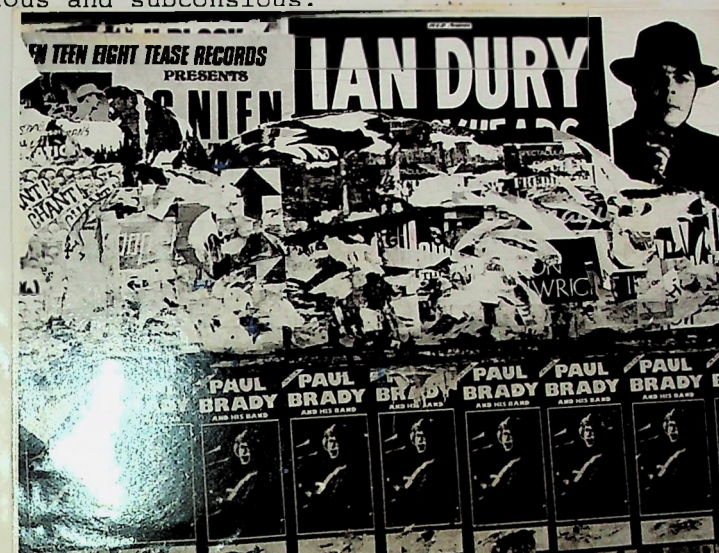
It has been my experience that when Art is incorporated into an integrated subject project it is seen by many other teachers as a service area only.

The onus is on the Art Teacher to continue as an educator in a visual language, to be prepared to get involved in new projects, but not to fall folly to projects that undermine the quality of his subject.

There is one important innovation that directly concerns Art Education. Media research is run by the Curriculum Development Unit, Trinity College. Its aim is to formulate a course in media study for pupils at second level.

Today, more so than ever, we are being bombarded by a wider and more sophisticated range of visual material. From newspapers, posters, television, advertisements, films etc. which are constantly impinging upon our

conscious and subconscious.



The media study programme intends to educate students to be critical of these visual stimuli in their environment.

METHOD  
APPLIED.

I have had the opportunity, during this course, to experience the media studies teaching method applied.

Briefly:

A slide show containing 6 slides.

Slide 1. Close up of man's eyes.

Students are asked to describe the connotations.

What type of character?

Tough, mean, friendly?

The image is slowly revealed in the remaining slides.

A new piece of visual information coming into view each time. After each slide the students are asked to describe the new connotation.



The final slide shows a full size advertisement and without realising it, the students have drawn out and narrated the psychological ploy of the advertisement.

This was an impressive display of a modern teaching method in operation. This type of progressive research and implementation is essential if education is to keep pace with the changing needs of pupils.

WHAT WE MUST DO. " We should develop our own educational system, not letting European standards be imposed upon us. It should evolve in a natural manner, developing it's unique characteristics. It should be critical of itself and in look outwards too, adapt external ideas. An occasional blood transfusion may be necessary, yet if we want to borrow from our neighbours let us make sure that his blood group matches ours".

Michael W. Murphy.

I agree with M.W.Murphy in that there may be a tendency to rush headlong into new developments without first thoroughly examining them. There has been an influx of new ideas from our neighbour accompanied with the appropriate jargon.

We must not forget our purpose as educators in a visual language. To foster emotional and intellectual fitness, a realisation of, and a contribution to, our environment and culture.

THE CONTRIB-  
-UTION OF  
ART PROJECTS  
ON THE  
LOCAL  
ENVIRONMENT.

In this chapter I have briefly outlined the social and environmental changes in Ireland today. I have also outlined what I consider to be the main educational developments and the directions they are moving in.

We have seen that the main emphasis in curriculum development is in the area of environmental studies. What contribution can Art Projects on the local Environment make?

The local Environment, be it Rural or Urban, provides a massive resource centre for teaching Art. Projects on the local environment are not divorced from pupil's experience. Work on the local Environment is seen to be purposeful. It developes a sense of place or community. In comparing different Environments, critical faculties are built up. It also developes cultural awareness.



## CHAPTER 2.

How to bring this learning process about.

BY PROJECTS. The project method seeks to educate the child through purposive activity in a social setting.

The organisation of projects can be varied to suit circumstances. Small groups of children may combine to pursue topics which interest them or a whole class may be divided into groups to pursue a common topic, each group taking a different aspect of it and putting their contribution into the common pool. The final result is a far more extensive study than one child would manage by himself.

The following is a list of possible topics for projects for 1st. year students, Greendale Community School, Kilbarrack.

TOPICS FOR My home.

PROJECT. Myself; Garden; Street; House; Pets; Shops.

Kilbarrack.

School; Learning; History of Area; Other Students: Jobs.

Dublin.

City; History; Museums; People; Transport Road, Ships, Canal.

If all the children are to benefit from this kind of work it needs to be skilfully handled.

1.

When children become absorbed in their own individual tasks they do not see what is being done elsewhere. They may be very well informed of their own small field but quite ignorant of what is being done in the other sections. The result of work as a whole must be made available to all those who take part in it.

2.

If the method is used repeatedly, there is a possibility that the same children are employed each time for certain work because they do it well. The organisation should arrange for various duties to go around to different children.

3.

Projects must be carefully organised, the original purpose must be kept clearly in mind and the subordinate tasks arranged with this in view. The fact that different children are doing different things at the same time demands considerable skill from the teacher if they are to be kept constantly and purposefully occupied, if they are not they soon become bored. When this happens the very freedom of movement inherent in project work invites disturbance and indiscipline.



My project with first years was on "Stone Age Kilbarrack". The project took the form of a story, a story being an appropriate motivational service for first years. We investigated the lifestyle of the Ugg family, a Kilbarrack stone age family. The choice of the Stone Age is not a random one. I thought, in choosing this area, the students would be confronted with using a lot of natural materials, e.g. rocks, sticks, grass, earth, shell, bone etc. thereby extending their experience of interesting materials that the young student has little contact with in Urban life today.

My syllabus for first and second year students stressed that this period should be used to build up a reservoir of information and experiences of materials. This project was geared to meet that end.

In applying themselves to the project the pupils' education is furthered by the following means:-

1. In handling and experiencing new materials, papier mache etc.
2. Their improvisation of materials.
4. In constructing.
5. In group working (learning from one another).

The following is a class given to first years:

"The Ugg family need somewhere to live."

We had already built up a large resource centre of found materials.

Class - First Years.

Date:-Jan.26th. 1981.

Ability - mixed.

Time:-2 X 40 mins.

CONTENT. Group Project. Building a model of a Stone Age dwelling with a variety of found materials.

OBJECTIVE. For the student to realise their 2 dimensional design in 3 dimensional, thus exploring new materials.

INTRODUC- (Class has been divided into groups and have chosen the  
-ION. type of dwelling they want to make).

Last week we looked at the type of house the Ugg family would have built. We are going to build one of these dwellings using the found materials we have collected. The Ugg family needs a place to live. Our model has to be well built and sturdy.

VISUAL AIDS. Illustrations of Stone Age dwellings. Emphasise use of materials.

- BRIEF.
1. Divide into your groups.
  2. Collect your building material.
  3. Select your final drawing from last week.
  4. Begin to make your model.
- \* Where possible give a specific job to students.

MATERIALS. Found materials, paste, paper.