



STUDIO IN A SCHOOL NYC: WHAT CAN WE DISCOVER?

Even the toughest of us have felt weighed down, anxious and fearful over the past year. The pressure to keep going, stay safe, be productive and keep it together has been relentless in the face of change that's seemingly happened overnight. For a practical and pragmatic character like Julie Applebaum, Senior Director of Studio in a School, to talk of 'healing' is a definite indicator of a challenging year.

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A year on from the first lockdown, like all the partners, things didn't really pan out as planned for Studio in a School. They had enjoyed an excellent first year of the Burberry Inspire programme, reaching students of an age that they wouldn't normally engage with. It was, as Julie explains, "fantastic, to be able to work with schools who normally wouldn't have engaged with us in visual art and to be able to work closely with their teachers." And when lockdown happened, with all the pivoting that was required, they were still asked by their schools to provide educational material, even though they couldn't be in the classroom. "We started creating student-facing illustrated written lessons and videos, right away," says Julie, but it was not requested through joined-up communication. "The school liaisons were happy about us creating and delivering them, but the teachers really couldn't handle it," she explains. "They were so overwhelmed with trying to organise their regular school day. They [the lessons] got to the school, but we don't know how much got to the students." They may not have reached their intended recipients (one educator decided that delivering Studio's classes was more than they could reasonably achieve), but the materials were able to travel further than just Burberry Inspire schools, as Studio in a School also shared them with two other middle schools in need during the lockdown.

Of course, there was always going to be a period of limbo, where no one was able to predict entirely what would happen next and this was when the partners leaned into each other for support. It began with the Creative Arts Team organising regular

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meetings among the New York partners, but this soon widened to encompass all partners and quickly became an important part of the programme for them all. "It was making an authentic connection with people so far away and sharing our experiences," says Julie. "And then a beautiful thing – I wasn't expecting their [The Hepworth Wakefield's] teaching practice to be so similar to ours, but it was extremely similar." This was a particular surprise because Julie had never even heard of The Hepworth Wakefield prior to the programme. "What an eye opener that was," Julie laughs. "I mean, the museum is incredible!" As it transpired, the two partners shared more than admiration, they were "simpatico", in terms of their approaches and able to share lessons and videos across their schools, as well as closely collaborating on their shared Creativity Kit.

However, while the relationship flourished, the kits were not plain sailing. Supply chain issues during international lockdowns meant that the contents changed as availability did. "Factories closed down. We ordered supplies in late August and didn't get them until the beginning of November. It took months. What we originally planned is not what we ended up doing." And getting them to the students was just as tricky – when New York City Department of Education offered parents a choice of sending their children to school a few times a week (hybrid) or entirely remote learning, 70% chose remote. For those who selected hybrid, they were in and out of school with alarming regularity as every new Covid case required a fortnight of quarantine. When schools did eventually open at the end of September, the resultant spike put them back at square one and everything closed again. "So, all over schools were opening, shutting down, opening, it was complete chaos," Julie recalls. Eventually 50% of the students received their Creativity Kits in January.

However, at the same time, Studio in a School began two in-school residencies, together offering remote learning to over two hundred students. "Do they have all the art supplies we bought for them?" asks Chris. "Definitely not. Is this the same type of instruction we would be doing in person? Absolutely not." But a lack of "materials rich art instruction" (an approach that Studio and Hepworth share), wasn't their primary concern, as a lack of art materials can be overcome by focusing on the kind of conceptual thinking that's the foundation of any fine art practice. The very real issue was the very real digital divide.

Julie explains: "In New York, the students are not required to turn their cameras on. So, almost the whole time the artists will be on a screen with thirty students, but only one or two will have their cameras on and maybe only five will answer their questions out loud. Some will do it in the chat. And then only a small handful from each class will actually upload the work. We can't see the work unless they upload it, but that doesn't mean that they aren't doing the work. It just means that there's such a wide digital divide." They discovered that despite the best efforts of the Department of Education to get devices to every student, most are learning on phones.

Not every aspect of remote engagement has been challenging. Studio in a School have also traditionally offered Professional Development to teachers and artists, and this has actually benefitted from the new online format. They were able to reach people all over New York City and in the UK with workshops that would normally have taken place in their in-house studio, which is a fifteen-minute walk from the nearest subway.

They've also found fresh inspiration and drive through their new relationship with The Hepworth Wakefield. Seeing the importance of graphic design and videomaking at the Hepworth paved the way for Studio to follow their lead, "to see that as a model actually was helpful and we got really good at creating instructional videos of our student-facing illustrative lessons." They've taken time to look in depth at each other's practice, understanding each other's formats and trying them out. No one can deny that it's been an educational year, even with its fears and frustrations. But learning is a lifelong undertaking and Studio in a School will be taking everything that has come to pass into the next stage of the programme and Julie already has more international plans – "I would love to get the teaching artists together."

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