

# Digital bridge

For young people who feel their voices are not often heard, the opportunity to tell their story, or put across an alternative view of the world, can be a transformational experience.

**E**len Ap Robert, Artistic Director at Galeri, a Creative Enterprise Centre in Caernarfon, has developed a number of partnership projects with local schools in the last four years. It's partly about audience development, as she's happy to admit. But over and above that, it's about opening up the arts to young people who often feel shut out from participation: 'We're trying to give people who don't usually have a voice the chance to share with us an insight into their lives, and what's important in their lives.'

Galeri's Digital Stories project at Ysgol Syr Hugh Owen Special Needs Unit is part of its SBARC! programme and is a prime example of how a partnership between a school and a community arts organisation can benefit excluded groups. Intentionally small-scale, involving five children at a time, Elen says the idea was to give the children as much control over the creative process as possible: 'They were their own editors... they could choose to tell whatever they wanted to tell.'

Each child was given a camera and spent a week taking snapshots of their lives. In the editing suite, these stills were woven into a two-minute piece, a voiceover threading sound and images together.

To overcome the group's initial wariness,

Project leader Rhian Cadwaladr opened the first session with a story-circle. The teachers weren't present to begin with – and although this wasn't planned, it seemed to work well, giving the children a little more freedom to relax and explore ideas. Other techniques helped to unlock their gifts, as Rhian explains: 'It was about trying to get them to think about telling stories succinctly. I'd light a long match, which burned for about the length of a digital story (two minutes)... they could talk as long as the match was alight. It made them think about not wasting a word... and because they were concentrating on the match they seemed to forget that people were listening to them.'

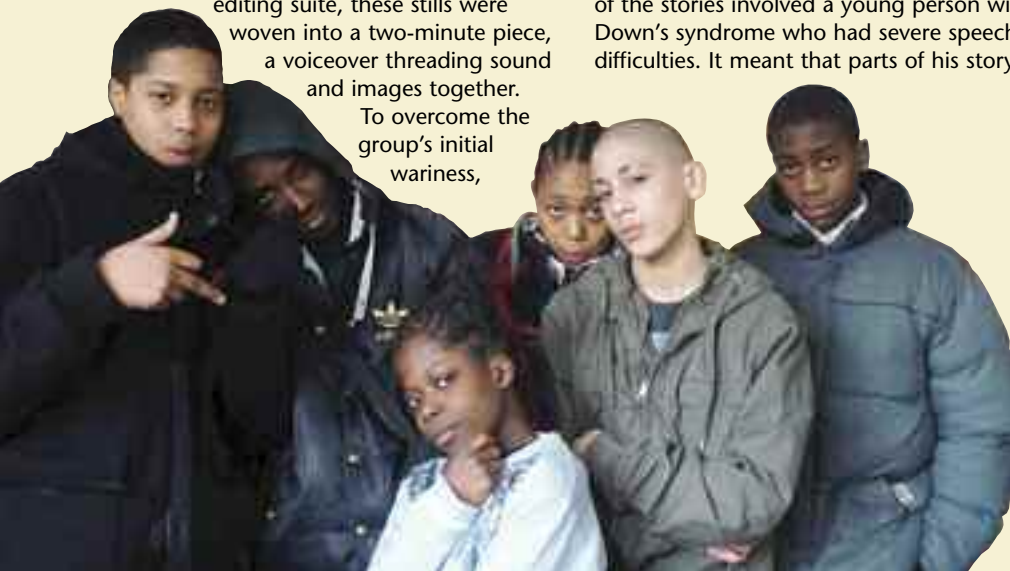
Both simple and effective, Galeri has found the Digital Stories formula translates easily to other settings. The centre is now working with a group of young people staying in a hostel in the area and, in partnership with the charity Contact a Family, with a group of disabled children and their parents. The stories that emerge may differ in these cases, but the idea that the author's voice is sacrosanct remains. For example, one of the stories involved a young person with Down's syndrome who had severe speech difficulties. It meant that parts of his story

were hard to comprehend. Nevertheless, Rhian resisted the idea of translating in any way, using subtitles, for example, which may have been an editor's instinct: 'We didn't understand perfectly what he was trying to say, but it was his opportunity to express himself and that's what counted.'

### Creating sparks

The arts allow us to explore our own values and perceptions; and act as a prism for other people's view of ourselves. To young people who find it difficult to negotiate their way through the world, for whatever reason, this socialising dynamic is of particular value. In another of Galeri's programmes, the centre has been working with local schools to engage marginalised young people through animation.

Galeri has supported a number of young people to create short films, bringing to life poems they have written collaboratively. The idea to use animation is a considered one: it is an art form that is enjoying a renaissance in youth culture and is a useful medium for engaging young people who may think that art with a capital A has nothing to offer. Again, the main driver is that the storyboard should originate from the young people themselves. The first session is facilitated by a poet, who finds out what makes them tick, and helps them to find a form of expression that gives shape to what's in their imaginations. A musician helps create a soundtrack; and in the second and third weeks of the project, based at the centre, a professional technician co-ordinates post-production.





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Elen points to how the work can be rewarding – for example, one particularly difficult young offender brought in a picture of Caernarfon Castle drawn from memory while he was on remand, which was then used as a central motif in the group’s film. However, she does not underplay the hard work involved when working with a group of disengaged young people: ‘It can be challenging for the kids because there’s an element of discipline involved, and an element of commitment; challenging for the tutors because there’s an element of the unexpected – anything can happen at any particular point – and challenging for the school’s staff, because they’re not used to people coming into their environment, which is very often quite a cocoon... but once trust is established, big things can happen.’

One of the ‘big things’ that Galeri promises is a screening of the work at PICS, its annual film festival for children and young people. It’s a big deal for the young people involved and it has led to some startling successes. ‘Elvis Preseli’, a 2008 production created by eleven 5 to 10 years olds from the Brynffynnon Referral Unit in Felinheli, Bangor, and which claims that Elvis is still alive and living in every village in Wales, recently netted an award at Zoom, the Wales’ International Young People’s Film Festival.

### Bring on the Beats

The advent of Web 2.0 as a means of distribution – YouTube, Flickr and so on – and the wider availability of cheap technology to generate content, marks the arrival of a

medium with the potential to be genuinely inclusive. However, though the potential is there, this egalitarianism is not yet fully fledged. Technology may be cheap, but it’s still out of the reach of the poorest in society. The world wide web is ostensibly open to anyone, but not everyone has the skills or self-confidence to connect and contribute. As a result, there are ‘have nots’ in the information age, just as in any other age.

The Inclusion Through Media programme (ITM), led by national charity Hi8us, aimed to shine a light on the inequalities that exist both in access to the means of consumption of new media (illustrated by the fact that only 50 per cent of people with no formal qualification have a computer in the home), but also access to the means of production – camcorders, software, digital editing suites, and the skills and knowledge to use them. The ITM programme set out to give under-represented groups a chance to participate, not just in front of the camera but behind it. The recently-televised documentary *Heavy Load*, about a punk band whose lead singer,

## L8R with Hi8us

Hi8us are also behind *L8R*, an award-winning interactive drama on TV, DVD and the web. Users can influence the lives of a group of characters as they deal with everyday teenage dilemmas. See [www.l8r-online.co.uk](http://www.l8r-online.co.uk).

guitarist and drummer have learning disabilities, was an ITM production; another ITM project handed authorship to a group of Roma young people.

As you’d expect, Hi8us considers schools to be natural allies in what it is trying to achieve: schools are a universal service with resources at their disposal, often located in areas where ‘voiceless’ communities are resource poor.

The ITM programme led Hi8us South to work in partnership with a number of London schools as part of their extended services work. Over ten weeks, a group of students made their own professional music video while exploring issues around the underlying culture of gangs.

At Park View Academy, in Haringey, project leader Darren Burke worked with a targeted group of Year 8 and 9 pupils to create their own music video. Two groups of twelve took part: the majority African Caribbean, with some Turkish and some mixed race; mainly male, but with two girls as part of one group.

Although the project was commissioned by the school, Darren’s background in youth work meant that he brought a different approach, one which levelled off the relationship between tutor and student. For a group used to kicking against the pricks, moving away from the usual hierarchy was a risk, so before the project began the whole group drew up and agreed to a code of conduct. Darren says that there were occasions when he needed to remind the group of the ‘youth charter’: ‘There were a few occasions when they got a bit excitable, for want of a better word, but for the most part everybody just got on with it.’

As with any youth-engagement activity the mantra was: start with where they’re at, challenge along the way. The entire group was obsessed with ‘laying down bars’, expressing themselves lyrically. They worked hard at what they did, and they were good at it, so naturally they jumped at the chance to showcase their talent.

While the hook is obvious, the real work comes after the initial spurt of interest. Practical work was accompanied by regular discussion of relevant issues, including the allure and consequences of joining gangs, engaging in anti-social behaviour and looking at alternative options.

Allegiance to the project, and a steady, but sympathetic challenging of their beliefs did have an impact on some of the pupils’ outlooks. In the words of one pupil: ‘If there’s going to be a fight and I want to get involved, I keep thinking about the music workshop, and what the consequences are going to be. Last time I nearly got kicked out of the music workshop because I got involved in a fight. I think twice now about things...’

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