

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Art
REPORT

St. Mel's College, Longford
Roll number: 63750B

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AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT
OIDEACHAIS | OF EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | AND SKILLS

**REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ART**

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St. Mel's College. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Art and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of this subject in the school. The evaluation was conducted over two days during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and the teacher, examined students' work, and had discussions with the teacher. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation and teachers' written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and subject teacher. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Provision of opportunity for students to access art and design courses has been established in the curriculum of St. Mel's College since early 2008.

Students may now attend optional art lessons after school once a week. This has been a significant step forward in the school's policy, which has heretofore offered, in the main, a traditionally academic curriculum. Current management have spearheaded this commendable innovation. It is valuable, on both the academic and personal-development fronts, that students can now have an artistic and cultural dimension in their schooling. There is one part-time teacher of Art assigned on two evenings to the art department: junior students and senior cycle students have different days for their two-hour class.

The work of this newly created art department has been praised in the highest way by the principal for its professional approach and the contribution it has made to students who have strong visual aptitude.

While this provision is indeed a significant improvement which gives students opportunity for personal development through art, opens career windows based on visual and spatial aptitudes, and enhances and extends academic and examination opportunities, the time allocated to the subject, and its position outside the timetabled school day are still significant disadvantages which students with artistic and creative capabilities must encounter.

The principal's commitment to establishing strong visual arts education in the school's academic culture is clear, and a strong vision of the advantages of the subject and of the future role it might serve was apparent in the discussions that outlined his aspirations. Management has been open to recommendations made as part of this inspection and has agreed to provide two classes within the school day for Leaving Certificate students to cover the history and appreciation of art component of the course, thus ensuring that students have continuity and an opportunity to develop momentum in a long-term context in developing skills and knowledge. This demonstrates the will to improve conditions for the subject and for the betterment of students' opportunity.

The physical conditions for delivery of art courses and programmes are very good. The new block of classrooms has a dedicated specialist art room included, but until very recently this was being used by another subject department. That this specialist art room has now been permanently reclaimed for art is a significant positive development in relation to whole-school provision of the subject.

At present, Art is being established as a subject and is being given some status and visibility in the college. The potential of the art department to grow and develop, and to further enhance the overall curricular opportunity available to students is notable, both in the attitudes and skills used in the delivery of courses and programmes and in the vision and expectations of the management input for the development of Art as a mainstream subject in the college. However, it is important not to underestimate the difficulties that are inherent in trying to deliver courses and programmes in the context of after-hours classes, both in furthering the knowledge and experience base of students for their own artistic personal development, and in using this context as the arena to bring students to a platform of examination readiness.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The principal assigned the art teacher the task of creating an art department plan, based on a vision for the introduction of the subject on an optional basis in the present, and that could be expanded in a future context.

There is a good outline plan, in first draft form, for teaching and learning activities of the art department, which has good levels of detail and usefulness. This would be enhanced by the addition of more fully elaborated learning outcomes and a further emphasis on differentiated delivery. It is recommended that these two aspects are integrated into the current plan, which should be reviewed in the light of the current subject inspection report.

By exploiting the small numbers in the self-selected groups, and the space and physical advantage of the art room, the nature and outcome of the art education offered have huge potential. In tapping into this potential, more planning for the big picture of where the department can go in the long, medium and short term is advised.

There needs to be a greater emphasis in the plan on equipping students to develop more complete skills of art and design appreciation to allow them to engage with visual culture. This should be an important element of junior cycle, beginning in the earliest stages of first year and continued in a planned, integrated way throughout the whole second-level experience of art and design.

This emphasis on helping students to be receptive to and critically appreciative of visual culture should be done by utilising art, architecture and design past and present, and by including both European and non-European cultures in its scope. While there are elements of this at present in teaching and learning, a fuller integration of it throughout the two cycles with an early introduction in first year is recommended.

The art department is proactively developing its skills and has demonstrated competence and flair in providing for and managing the students' learning needs in pottery and ceramics. It is recommended that this is continued and that the advantages of small student numbers, ample space and the facility for clay-based sculpture in modelling and construction is further developed over time. The department has specialist experience of graphic design and it is advised that this also be developed in engaging and educationally challenging ways, with an

emphasis on bringing students to a point of examination readiness through creative rather than doctrinaire pathways within the medium.

Excellent preparation had been done for the classes inspected.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The physical conditions for delivery of art courses and programmes are very good, with a purpose-built art room, a kiln and lots of space and natural light. The art room is well laid out with a customised clay and sculpture area. Due to the small class size, students get much individual attention. Junior cycle classes are taught together on the same afternoon and senior cycle on the following. With second and third years, it is recommended that shared learning experiences, combined instruction and joint assignments should be undertaken wherever possible, so that the two groups can be better managed and surveyed. At the time of the evaluation, the third-year students were involved with their State Examinations Commission (SEC) project and the second years were doing very good work in pottery. In the previous term, the Transition Year (TY) class had done interesting work on the theme of identity, resulting in self portraits which were complex and detailed. This was very good practice.

Students are obviously well used to working on their own initiative in the dual-class context and remained engaged and motivated, particularly the second years. The third years were developing ideas for the project and, at this challenging time, could have benefited from some more direct assignment. There is a danger that students may flounder and not be very productive at the ideas generation stage of the project, and this is particularly understandable in relation to the students in question who have had less initial preparation in skills and activities building than others because of the newness of the art department. On the day of the inspection, the third-year students had almost all chosen and progressed somewhat on the theme or idea that attracted them. It was not clear what progress they have made themselves from the beginning to the end of the class, as they were thinking and writing, looking at books and web printouts as secondary sources of stimulus and inspiration. It would have been valuable for them to start making trial sketches in 2-D or 3-D of some aspect of their idea, in order to motivate them and to bring them into the domain of materials and action from the domain of thinking and searching. It is recommended that in future, third years should briskly progress towards stating their initial ideas, however tentative, in art materials, and to use these as a starting point for development. Too many days of thinking without active artistic follow-through are not that useful for students with narrow experience of Art and who really need the sort of motivation that practical hands-on engagement can provide.

Students were using the web during classes. Its most immediate use was for identification of sources: the extension of its use for other research purposes and creative procedures is advised. This use of the web was appropriate for third years at the particular stage they were at in finding a direction in the Junior Certificate art project. Students, in general, often have the tendency to find ready-made answers to the project theme on the web and, as useful as it is for this purpose, it undeniably fosters a culture of dependency on secondary sources, partly because of the convenience with which images can be summoned up. It is recommended that firm direction and guidelines are given so that students use ICT as a research and learning tool rather than an examination convenience that short-circuits the higher educational goals of the project work. There is a danger for third years of using secondary sources exclusively in the SEC project, and this should be carefully avoided through teaching and learning that emphasises skills necessary for utilising primary sources from first year through third year and beyond.

Comprehensive information about the methodology used in a pottery lesson for junior students was provided for the classes inspected. An equally impressive worksheet had been prepared for the graphic design class with senior cycle students, which provided a good background to the first principles of designing for print media. It is impressive that a trip to a commercial printer was planned to link in with these graphic design assignments. All this is very good practice and is highly commended.

Students are highly motivated and committed, as their attendance after timetabled school hours attests. The manner in which the students are managed and the tone in which interactions take place adds to the pleasant and positive teaching and learning atmosphere in the art room.

It is suggested that for the history and appreciation component, on which some work has already been done to date, a carefully scheduled series of homework tasks, covering history, appreciation and practical assignments, be prepared. This is essential in order to create continuity and momentum in engagement and learning. In order to ensure student access to full-course coverage, it would be valuable if the Leaving Certificate history and appreciation of art component was delivered during the timetabled school day, whenever it becomes possible to arrange this.

Pro-active steps have been taken to counter some of the difficulties inherent in once-a-week class contact. The art department sends reminders to students over the internet about homework and organisational matters. In order that this very positive initiative has maximum effect in developing students work patterns for Art, especially where the third years' SEC project is concerned, it is recommended that the art department liaise with those colleagues who manage the homework policy so that students of Art comply with its requirements as for all other subject areas. It is suggested that a strategy be planned to counteract other challenges and adverse effect, such as continuity, of once-a-week class contact.

It was apparent, in some student art portfolios, that there was too heavy a reliance on pencil drawing. It is recognised that, for many students, this is both default position and comfort zone, the medium being familiar and therefore unthreatening. Nonetheless it does impose limits on students' development and it is recommended that ways of getting students to use other media and to become adept at a range of drawing approaches should be prioritised. It is recommended too that, where students have the aptitude and motivation, use of secondary sources for the generation of images and themes should be kept to an absolute minimum, with an emphasis instead on imagination and observation as the source of starting points in projects and assignments. It is recommended that the use of secondary sources as a basis for students' own artefacts should be challenged through planning, teaching methodologies and the development of the skills that facilitate the near-habitual use of primary sources.

ASSESSMENT

It is recommended that long-term formal assignments are given every term, in addition to specific nightly or weekly ones. Thus, a time-consuming activity like calligraphy can be introduced in class but an elaborate exercise can be completed over time at home so that class time, necessary for developing perceptual and technical skills, is not monopolised by slow-moving and repetitive learning activity. Such long-term work should be monitored every few weeks and the assessment of it be factored into end-of-year grades. In this way, students of higher aptitude and motivation have an opportunity to develop artistic individuality.

It is commendable that the students are e-mailed reminders about their homework and essays. This is particularly useful in countering problems associated with a once-a-week class.

A combination of assessment procedures is in use in the art department: continuous assessment based on class work and examinations. There are written examinations for the history and appreciation of art component of the Leaving Certificate programme. Students are monitored and advised constantly whilst working on their Junior Certificate project. Continual assessment is carried out throughout the year on students' practical and written work. There are systematic records maintained of students' assessment and examination results. End-of-term and end-of-year results are communicated to parents and guardians. Regular parent-teacher meetings are held and the art department provides discussion, feedback and advice at these.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- A small self-selected cohort of students receives individualised attention in a supportive and conscientiously-run art department, with a strong dual emphasis on personal development and examination preparation.
- The art department receives strong support from senior management who are conscious of its educational potential and its contribution to developing the college's cultural profile.
- The physical conditions for delivery of art courses and programmes are very good, with a purpose-built art room, a kiln and lots of space and natural light.
- A good approach to planning and course delivery was evident.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:

- It is recommended that, in order to ensure student access to full-course coverage, it would be valuable if the Leaving Certificate history and appreciation of art component was delivered during the timetabled school day, whenever it becomes possible to arrange this.
- It is recommended that planning should be reviewed in the light of the current subject inspection report. The integration of more fully elaborated learning outcomes and a further emphasis on differentiated delivery should be included in this review.
- Now that the art department has been established, more planning for how the visual art education provided might be further developed in the long, medium and short term is advised.
- It is recommended that, where possible, joint learning experiences and tasks are delivered for the junior cycle students who are timetabled together.
- The use of secondary sources as basis for students' own artefacts should be challenged through planning, teaching methodologies and the development of the skills that facilitate the near-habitual use of primary sources.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the art department and the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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