An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Art
REPORT

Patrician Secondary School
Newbridge
Co. Kildare
Roll number: 61681V

Date of inspection: 17 November 2009
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ART

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Patrician Secondary School, Newbridge. 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 one day during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and teachers, examined students’ work, and had discussions with the teachers. 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. 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

There is very good support for Art in Patrician Secondary School in Newbridge. The subject is well established and there is good demand for it. The principal is insightful about the developmental effect Art as an educational experience can have for students. He is very clear about the role of Art as a nurturer of creativity in the general sense and has tried to sell this notion to parents by promoting the subject as a valuable Leaving Certificate option for all, as an arena for developing a different, complimentary set of skills and behaviours that are useful, not only just for those who aspire to a career in visual art, but also for sciences, humanities and business.

The art room is spacious, high ceilinged and well lit. Timetable and budget support the subject adequately. There are facilities for pottery and clay modelling. There is also a printing press and good, though limited, storage. Information and communication technology (ICT) facilities are available in situ in the art room and computer rooms are available to the art department elsewhere in the school.

There is a creative and artistic dimension amongst the school personnel beyond the art department and the art department links well with other staff members who provide teaching inputs, particularly in ICT and photography. There is a culture of film making in the school which is to the advantage of the overall aesthetic development and opportunity of the students. Long-term enhancement of ICT facilities is envisaged.

The art department contributes widely to school activities and has a much-appreciated profile in the school’s interface with parents and the public. For example, it provides theatre design for school productions annually.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

There is a good outline plan for teaching and learning activities of the art department, which would be greatly 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.

It would be valuable if there was 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, both for their current studies, and in the long term as a life skill. This should be an important element of junior cycle, beginning in the earliest stages of first year, and continuing 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 be 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. Also, it is recommended that the appreciation of art component of the Leaving Certificate course is taught first in fifth year, as opposed to the more overtly historical and archaeological material in the other sections, in order that students acquire the skills necessary to engage with art, design and architectural history.

Proactive assessment by the art department of its successes and challenges was documented in the subject department plan. This was used as part of the discussion held during the inspection and had a strong influence on recommendations for particular parts of the senior cycle course. That the proactive assessment was present testifies to the excellence of the approach to delivering strong and effective learning experiences to students.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

The art room is well laid out and has adequate natural light and there is a customised clay and sculpture area.

A good learning atmosphere and a cordial interaction with, and management of, students was strongly in evidence in the art department. Imaginative approaches are taken to delivering the courses. Admirably, these are always underpinned with practical and realistic expectations.

Teaching and learning are exceptionally good and students produce creative, expressive and personal artefacts. Part of this good practice is that assessment is not allowed to inhibit full engagement with the art-making process. While there is consciousness of state examinations criteria, these do not define the type of learning experiences students have access to in the art department. This is just one of the many impressive aspects of the commitment to real and true art education that the very professional delivery of the subject encapsulates in Patrician Secondary School. The culture of course delivery in the department enables students to make art and design artefacts that are neither templated nor formulaic. This is commended in the highest possible way.

Three-dimensional work, particularly in modelling and ceramics, is notable for its good technique and expressive energy. Authentic ceramic glazes are used by students and these enhance all the pottery and modelling artefacts students make.

It was noted in the first-year art portfolios that there was too heavy a reliance on pencil drawing. It is recognised that for many students this is a default position or comfort zone, the medium being familiar and therefore unthreatening. Nonetheless, it does limit 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.

Transition Year (TY) students are working through assignments on Japanese culture and a visit to the Chester Beatty library was imminent at the time of the inspection, as part of this well-thought-out and delivered set of themed learning experiences. For example, impressive among the learning activities on Japanese art is the making and firing of traditional tea-ceremony ware called raku. Technically and artistically this type of pottery is a challenge to students and typifies the excellent conceptualisation of the possibilities inherent in teaching art and design at second level in train in the art department. As a point of engagement with Japanese culture raku pottery was an inspired and insightful choice.

Insight into art and design media, and the creative and cultural aspects of these media, is apparent in the way learning experiences are delivered as part of courses and programmes by the art department, and in the expectations that are held for student attainment in artefact-making in these media.

There is a sense that the teaching is focussed on intrinsic characteristics of Art as a discipline, as it is practised for itself rather than as something that is reduced, compromised or limited by being placed within the school curriculum and the state examinations mechanisms. Thus, students are exposed to the full processes, rather than reductionist stances, in relation to the making, doing and thinking about art and design. Learning opportunities are rich, complex and reflective of what is real and authentic in art and design, and this is greatly to the advantage of students of all aptitudes in both junior and senior cycle.

Due to the nature range, breadth and balance of the art department's efforts, students achieve in proportion to their level of aptitude and motivation and every year, after Leaving Certificate, students from Patrician Secondary School take up third-level courses in art and design. Great encouragement is given to students who aspire to careers in art, design and architecture. The differentiated nature of teaching and classroom support is most advantageous to such students. In order to support the career aspirations of students, the art department makes annual trips to the open days at the National College of Art and Design and Dun Laoghaire College of Art and Design. Practical enablement of students’ learning and the high expectations of the art department and the school generally all have contributed to the success experienced over a long period of the college’s students in obtaining places in art colleges.

It was reported during the inspection that the state examinations provide a problematic dynamic for teaching and learning in sixth year. Sixth-year students, in an effort to contend with the Leaving Certificate art examination, have a tendency to become super-careful and much less creative in their approach to assignments, in contrast to their previous track record in fifth year.

As part of a series of other measures of countering the impact on sixth-year work of the prospect of the state examinations in Art, it is recommended that sixth years keep up a similar sketchbook to the one they keep in their fifth year, and that during the first weeks of sixth year they develop some of the ideas left unused from their fifth-year sketchbook. This is a strategy to help them to connect again with the characteristic type of creative work they have previously done. This natural, personally expressive process of making art and design artefacts should be the basis of the artefacts students prepare for their Leaving certificate examinations in art.

ICT was used to deliver lesson content during the inspection. This was very well handled and the material used was appropriate and accessible to students. Students in junior cycle use the internet for research of images. While some students use these images in a creative way,
many can rely too heavily on these secondary sources. It is recommended that, where students have the aptitude and motivation, use of secondary sources for the generation of images and visualisation of themes should be kept to an absolute minimum with an emphasis instead on imagination and observation as the starting point in projects and assignments. Secondary sources are most acceptably used by those students who are very challenged by the requirements of the subject. The majority of students however are capable of using mostly primary sources in their work.

Many of the school's public areas have displays of artefacts created by students, either as individuals or groups. Some of the artefacts are permanently in situ and this has a motivating and affirming effect, particularly for LCA students.

Differentiation is in use. The needs of individual groups are catered for so that their engagement and motivation are optimised, whatever the general aptitude or motivation of students in the group. This very insightful practice demonstrates that the art department proactively finds solutions, where challenges arise, whether in the pedagogic or student management domain, that are appropriate and productive. Students are affirmed and supported in their learning.

**ASSESSMENT**

Homework is set, and students’ personal sketchbooks are part of the system of homework in operation. This system is working well, especially in fifth year. Development of the modes and timescales of homework could valuably add to student attainment and, with this in mind, it is recommended that, in first year and second year, the 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 as homework so that the lesson time necessary for a development in perceptual and technical skills is not monopolised by slow-moving and repetitive learning activity. Such long-term homework assignments should be monitored every few weeks and the assessment of it factored into end-of-year grades. In this way students of higher aptitude and motivations have an opportunity to develop artistic individuality and students who are challenged by the basics have time to work at their own pace.

It is important to remind sixth-year students that the mechanisms of the examination should not inhibit their creativity, but rather provide a vehicle to unleash it. However the inhibitory power of the examination can result in reliance on imitative rather than creative solutions. This is a regressive position for those students who have developed real skills, both technical and creative, as it does not allow them to showcase their achievement in the examination framework. It is recommended that, in order that such an undesirable educational impact by the examinations may be avoided, specific efforts and strategies are put in place to empower and give confidence to students on the basis of what they have attained already in their art and design learning. The use of some concrete devices, such as self-report questionnaires, whereby students of all aptitudes and capabilities are facilitated to carry out some self assessment, would enhance and extend the art departments already established informal practices in this area. The workability of these measures should be a key element in the form they should take as an adjunct to the formal assessment which is in place and functioning well already.

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. The students are closely observed, monitored and advised whilst working on their Junior
Certificate project and Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and TY assignments. A strong consciousness of SEC assessment criteria, and of the associated practical requirements, informs the work of the art department. There are systematic records of students’ during-term, end-of-term, and end-of-year assessment and examination results. End-of-term and end-of-year results are communicated to parents and guardians. Regular parent-teacher meetings are held in the school and the art department contributes discussion, feedback and advice at these.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is good whole-school support for the subject and the principal is insightful of the wider advantages of visual art education.
- Learning opportunities for students are rich, complex and reflective of what is real and authentic in art and design, avoiding many of the shortfalls frequently seen in visual arts education.
- Teaching and learning are exceptionally good and students produce creative, expressive and personal artefacts.
- Teaching style ensures that assessment does not inhibit full engagement with the art-making processes.

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

- It is recommended that ways of getting students to use a wide variety of drawing media and to become adept at a range of drawing approaches should be prioritised in planning, particularly in first year.
- It is recommended that, where students have the aptitude and motivation, the 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 starting point in projects and assignments.
- It is recommended that the appreciation of art component of the Leaving Certificate course is taught first in fifth year, as opposed to the more overtly historical and archaeological material in the other sections, in order that students acquire the skills necessary to engage with art, design and architectural history.

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

*Published, November 2010*