

# articulate

An Evaluation of the National Gallery's Secondary School Literacy Project  
2008-2009



## articulate: the context

Increasing evidence demonstrates that museums and galleries can make a valuable contribution to the learning experiences of primary and secondary school students. In 2002 the National Gallery developed the *Articulate* project, funded by Deutsche Bank, in response to the extension of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) to secondary schools. *Articulate* was a three-year project that aimed to support London schools that were under-performing in literacy to implement the NLS and improve the attainment of young people. Using the National Gallery's collections as a starting point, students worked closely with authors, poets, scriptwriters, playwrights and journalists in a masterclass to develop their writing skills, exploring the variety of ways that images can be used to encourage different styles of writing. The work produced at the Gallery was continued and developed with English departments back at school. Schools were chosen in consultation with Local Education Authority (LEA) literacy advisors and the cost of the project, including transport costs, was entirely subsidised to enable the schools to access the National Gallery. The success of Phase 1, with 1360 secondary school students taking part, encouraged the National Gallery and Deutsche Bank to run a second phase of *Articulate* from May 2006 to July 2009.

*Articulate* is an example of where a cultural institution has responded to the increased importance of literacy to the UK and global context in the twenty-first century. Literacy is increasingly regarded as a complex cultural and social activity, crucial to gaining access to subjects in school and regarded as an integral part of life, and important to the personal growth of young people and their development as democratic citizens. Museums and galleries can play a vital role in the development and support of literacy, both in terms of formal education provision and lifelong learning. Through the resources that museums and galleries have at their disposal students can be provided with a purpose to write that can stimulate their imaginations and motivate them. Providing a context for literacy is particularly valuable for disadvantaged young people who may not have access to cultural and wider experiences through their home lives.



## articulate: the evaluation

The Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG), based in the School of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, was approached by Karen Hosack, Head of Schools at the National Gallery, to evaluate Phase 2 of *Articulate*. RCMG researchers have a long experience and deep knowledge of museums and museum education and this has informed both the research design and the analysis and interpretation of the data. The following research questions have been used to frame this evaluation:

- To what extent have the *Articulate* masterclasses influenced the content of English lessons in partner schools and how relevant is the project to the KS3 National Curriculum?
- Have teachers' and students' attitudes towards museums and galleries changed as a result of participating in the *Articulate* project?
- To what extent do teachers feel they have been supported in the *Articulate* project by the Gallery, the writers and their own school?
- What impact has participating in the *Articulate* project had on the KS3 pupils who have participated?

From March 2008 to August 2009 data was gathered from multiple perspectives including National Gallery staff, writers, teachers and students to give both the short-term and longer-term, retrospective, impact of *Articulate*. Three schools were selected as case studies in consultation with the National Gallery and collectively their experiences gave a view of *Articulate* from two schools that have participated in the full six years of the project (Phases 1 and 2), one of which is a special school, and one school that has participated in Phase 2 of *Articulate*. RCMG also drew upon extensive experience of research into the learning characteristics of museums and galleries as a context in which to nest the findings from this evaluation.



*Surprised!* 1891, Henri Rousseau

## articulate: the key findings

### An influential and significant programme

Clear benefits were reported by teachers and students who participated in *Articulate*. They valued very highly the opportunity to work with high profile professional writers in the context of the National Gallery and to come into contact with real works of art from the Gallery collections. From the writers, teachers learnt new ways of working and approaching literacy that could be integrated into the curriculum; they were inspired and motivated to take their students on new avenues of exploration back in the classroom. The young people involved valued the opportunity that *Articulate* offered them to improve as 'writers', particularly those students who struggled with literacy in an academic context.

### A highly successful concept

*Articulate* was a unique project based around the effective masterclass concept. The three-year project created a sustained period of contact with targeted schools. This was crucial to helping the schools develop their confidence in accessing and using cultural institutions like the National Gallery. This sustained relationship enabled schools to become confident users of the National Gallery and embed the project into the practice of the school. Over time the schools have become 'critical consumers' with increasing levels of sophistication and more discerning in their response to the project. It is unlikely that the schools would have been able to access this kind of activity except through *Articulate*.

By targeting secondary students at Key Stage 3, *Articulate* took place at a very significant time in the lives of the young people involved. At a formative stage in their development, it is critical to engage young people in their learning during this period. Students understood that literacy was critical within school but also to the world beyond the classroom. Supporting them at this age, therefore, is a real critical investment in the future of students who are amongst the most vulnerable.



## A highly inclusive programme

The three case study schools have a number of characteristics that present particular challenges to the teaching and learning of literacy. The schools are located in deprived areas of London, their students experiencing a range of backgrounds which may work against their achievement in literacy. In all three schools there are very high proportions of students, up to three-quarters, with English as an additional language. It was critical for the *Articulate* project to inspire and support the learning of these young people, because these are experiences that they may not otherwise be exposed to, for example in their home lives. For young people who struggle in the more academic context of school, the opportunity to learn in a new environment with unfamiliar adults who did not know their 'reputation' at school gave them new impetus to respond and find their voice. Activities based around the visual stimuli of a painting rather than a written text appealed to different styles of learning, suitable for those who may have English as an additional language or special educational needs. Some of the young people were very aware that their ability to recall a subject increased when they could link it to a visual stimulus. The writers and teachers considered that the value of visual stimuli was that artworks enabled an immediate reaction from the young people, whatever their ability, which could then be developed into a deeper understanding. The different learning context of the National Gallery encouraged different behaviour from the young people, particularly those who may be disaffected or disengaged from school. Those students who do not flourish in an academic context were often the ones who thrived in *Articulate* because it offered them a new context in which to learn.

For Woodfield School it was hugely important to be part of a programme for mainstream schools, rather than being singled out as a special school. It increased the teachers' confidence to be valued by the National Gallery equally to mainstream schools, and the students gained enormous value from it as it increased their self-esteem.

Visits to the National Gallery broke down some of the barriers to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds from using art galleries, however they still regarded the prospect of visiting alone very daunting. This finding highlights the need for support for young people visiting the National Gallery beyond the school context.



## The significance of using professional writers in a literacy project

Through the masterclasses the writers engaged the young people by using the National Gallery's collections as a stimulus to develop their skills and confidence in literacy. The concept of a masterclass implies quality and expertise. It was critical therefore that the National Gallery was able to access quality, high-profile writers. Students responded well to the writers' creativity and differentiated between the focus and motivation of teachers, who are bound by the National Curriculum and the structures of school, where the focus is on exams and achievement. This was contrasted with the writers where the motivation to write is inwardly driven, it comes from the person rather than to meet the needs of the curriculum. Students responded well to the creative freedom offered to them by the writers, who understood that the importance of literacy goes beyond the academic context. The writers were reluctant to engage with supporting the curriculum which they felt was very constraining to literacy.

The relationship between the young people and the writers was critical to the success of the masterclass and it was essential that writers were effective facilitators in their work with vulnerable young people, who often have low self-esteem and low confidence in their learning ability. Their manner and approach were very important. Effective writers were able to read the needs of the group and respond to the young people's needs inclusively. They valued working with young people. On the other hand, the young people were very sensitive to writers who were less aware of their abilities and needs. Resilience is seen as essential in learning to give "an enhanced capacity to take things forward when the going gets tough. Resilient learners are able to resist difficulties and maintain momentum" (Hooper-Greenhill 2007: 180). For young people who lack such resilience, their confidence was easily crushed by adults who were less responsive to them and their needs. With the schools working hard to build resilience in their learners, effective writers were those who reinforced this work.



## Using paintings to support literacy

*Articulate* was an intersection between professional skills, high-quality collections of paintings and a focus on literacy. The link between a visual stimulus and literacy was incredibly strong, particularly for young people who struggle with written text or who have English as an additional language. For some students their visual memory was really important and powerful as a stimulus to learning and they recognised that they remembered more when they could attach it to something visual. Discussion and verbal activities around the paintings also helped those who lacked confidence in their writing. The use of the art collections and context of the National Gallery reinforced the importance of enabling young people to have real and concrete experiences that inspire them to be creative in new ways and give them actual substantive content which they can then write about. The most successful writers enthused the young people about the artworks and used the story of their chosen painting as a 'hook' to draw the young people in, facilitating the development of vivid pictures in the young people's minds which they could then write about.



*Salome receives the Head of Saint John the Baptist* 1607-10,  
Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio

## Creating memorable experiences

With amazing ability young people were able to recall huge amounts of detail of their *Articulate* experiences, suggesting the significant impact it has had across their school careers. They remembered the paintings they looked at, the writers they came into contact with and the content of sessions. Year 11 students from Woodfield School remembered vividly their experiences of *Articulate* five years later, especially working with Sarah Phelps and Scarlett Johnson from Eastenders. This memory had endured across their entire secondary school career.

Unfortunately the impact of negative memories, which were rare, can be just as enduring. Where the young people's needs are not met and they do not feel that they benefit from the session, it can be damaging for young people's confidence and even close doors for them, discouraging them from pursuing career ideas in the future.



*The Umbrellas* about 1881-6,  
Pierre-Auguste Renoir



## Influencing the content of English lessons

*Articulate* clearly influenced the content of English lessons at the three case study schools. Teachers reported that they had been well supported by the National Gallery and the senior management of their schools in embedding the programme in the curriculum across the three years. The three schools involved in the evaluation had very idiosyncratic approaches to the integration of *Articulate* into the curriculum, but common to all the schools was the way in which *Articulate* has given the teachers new approaches and ideas to the teaching of literacy, using the collections as a visual stimulus to fulfil the requirements of the National Curriculum. Hackney Free took a very highly structured approach and produced in-depth resources for schemes of work over a sustained time (half a term), which embedded extensive use of paintings as a stimulus. *Articulate* therefore had a very strong impact on the structure of English lessons, with each unit of work arranged around the Gallery visit. The other case study schools were less highly structured in their approach but nonetheless clearly made the connection between *Articulate* and the development of English lessons. Hounslow Manor and Woodfield School were much more flexible and relied more on the perception and judgement of the teachers as to how the *Articulate* sessions were incorporated into the schemes of work. Teachers reported that they used the *Articulate* sessions as an introduction to a scheme of work or genre of literacy, or drew on the skills and approaches used in the Gallery with the writer, back in the classroom.

There was a risk however that where sessions were not quite so effective the learning was not built on or incorporated in the curriculum; sometimes teachers seemed to lack the confidence to incorporate them or did not have a deep enough investment in the project to embed it into teaching. It is suggested that the National Gallery could also model some of the ways in which schools might incorporate projects like *Articulate* into the curriculum. The development of a wider community of practice of schools involved in the project could be one mechanism through which this could be achieved, although there are many barriers to establishing such a community amongst secondary schools.

## Going beyond the curriculum

The experience of the three case study schools reveals that *Articulate* has supported the implementation of the NLS very successfully. However, as the writers discussed, and the students also understood, the significance of *Articulate* goes beyond the National Curriculum. As mentioned previously, young people were able to differentiate between teachers, whose approach to literacy was constrained by the focus on the curriculum and examinations, and the writers, whose inwardly-driven motivation to write enabled them greater creative freedom. This creative freedom really benefited the students who thrived in the learning context of the Gallery, even those students disengaged by learning in the classroom context.

## Demonstrating the power of learning in museums and galleries

The experience of the schools involved in *Articulate* clearly reflects wider findings about the power of learning in museums and galleries. Enjoyment was a clear factor in the experiences of teachers and students. Previous studies have shown that teachers consider enjoyment to act as a catalyst to a range of other learning outcomes. If students enjoy their experience at the museum or gallery they are more motivated to learn. The importance of an emotional or personal connection to learning was also highlighted. The experiences at the National Gallery were memorable because they engaged the young people's emotions as well as their intellect, evidenced by the enthusiasm that students had for the paintings and writers that they had worked with, often several years later. There was a 'wow' factor for many of the students coming into contact with real paintings, their value and status evidenced by being in the National Gallery. Although the National Gallery was unfamiliar to the young people, it was a safe and secure environment in which they enjoyed learning and the National Gallery staff noticed how increasingly relaxed and confident their behaviour became over the three years. Outside of the classroom, coming into contact with new adults, the students were able to develop new identities as learners. Young people who might be disaffected in the classroom or struggle with more formal approaches responded well to the new environment, often finding a voice and wanting to contribute. Some of the teachers linked this to the different relationships established with adults who are not teachers. They have a different kind of authority which the young people respond to well if they feel comfortable and able to participate. These findings therefore point to the National Gallery as making a strong contribution to the creation of a "rich and tangible learning environment... providing enjoyable, effective and stimulating pathways to learning for all [young people]" (Hooper-Greenhill et al 2006: xv).



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Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG)  
School of Museum Studies  
University of Leicester, Museum Studies Building  
19 University Road, Leicester LE1 7RF

Jad25@le.ac.uk