

Decibels and Audiovisability Art and Music Workshops: evaluation



Eloise Garland and I ran a total of four afternoon workshop sessions over two weeks in May 2019, working with two sets of students at the PACE Centre in Aylesbury. They took place at both their Primary School (Philip Green House, Coventon Road, Aylesbury) and their Secondary School (Bradbury Campus, 156 Wendover Road, Aylesbury).

They were an opportunity to promote Subpac technology in a specialist educational setting and a way of building on previous collaborative work on a Decibels and Audiovisability Creating Music through Technology R&D project, funded by the Sobell Foundation and Arts

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Council England (ACE). This revolved round Laurentia Tan, a medal-winning deaf Paradressage rider, and her access to music in international competitive dressage - which made Decibels and Audiovisability, a multi-disciplinary creative initiative with music and deaf people at its core, ideal partners.

The Creating Music through Technology project gave us our opportunity to raise the profile of both Laurentia and Subpac via film, music, journalism, and visual art made by deaf people, so taking this work to schools like PACE, which is aimed at children with motor disabilities like Laurentia (who has cerebral palsy), was a natural next step.

With both sets of children, the workshops took two parts. The first part was a 45-minute school assembly, with a short film of the R&D being shown on a large screen and a briefing of the project. This was followed by a demonstration in which Eloise approached each of the children with the Subpac vest for them to feel - 15 children in the Primary school assembly, and 10 in the Secondary - before I took up the mantle to do a live drawing of a horse with it on, allowing the music to influence my mark-making.

The second part was a 30-minute repeat of said demonstration the following week, before the children went back into their group classrooms. Each group - there were three in Primary, and rather fewer in Secondary, allowing more scope for flexibility - had three 20-minute activities each. The first group discussed the assembly with their conductors (teachers) and LSAs (1:1 learning support assistants); the second group explored feelings in music with Eloise; and the

third group, with me, had a go at painting or drawing with the Subpac vest on. (I decided to let them choose their own art materials by way of adapting to their individual disabilities - cerebral palsy is a wide-ranging umbrella term.) When they had finished one 20-minute activity, Eloise, I, and designated staff then swapped places.

The results were very exciting. The children had clearly made mental notes of my live drawing, and created their own movement paintings. Some even managed to evoke the sense of a galloping horse in their abstract marks. You could actually see their confidence growing as they went on - I got the sense they felt empowered by the vibrotactile qualities of the vest. You can see in the selection of images above how they responded to my original live drawing (also included).

I have been an artist and writer for over twenty years, often collaborating with other deaf and disabled artists: most notably as Founder Director of Salon, a grant-funded Deaf contemporary visual arts project that ran for five years. Yet that was the first time I had facilitated, or co-facilitated, an art workshop with disabled children specifically, and it meant so much to me as a parent of a disabled child: my own daughter, Isobel, is a PACE student. I felt this was crucial to the development of the children's independent, critical thinking - creativity is after all key to advances in technology, science, and the humanities.

Eloise herself was popular in her music activity, getting the children to suggest emotions which she conveyed briefly on her violin. This gave the children much pleasure and incentivised them to ask for more. It didn't matter whether it preceded or followed the visual art activity with me - far more important was how their juxtaposition fuelled the children's imaginations on a multi-dimensional level.

I'm not just saying that! The staff were very moved by the workshops too, and I'm pleased to say they gave positive feedback. Here are their thoughts:

“Very interactive and creative work shown to the children. Allowing the children to explore with different instruments, music, etc.”

“Really interesting and innovative workshop. The music and emotions part was particularly useful for our children who are learning to recognise their own emotions.”

“Innovative, opens the door and gives lots of opportunity for people to live normal lives and access sports and dance.”

“Exceptional piece of equipment presented in an easy to understand way.”

“Experiencing music in different ways was great for all the students. They seemed engaged. They particularly enjoyed hearing the violin making sounds connected to different emotions, which was a great way of exploring emotional development. Looking forward to seeing more from this project.”

Indeed, at the time of writing, Eloise and I are preparing to run similar 90-minute workshops at PACE this summer. Although these will be paid by a different charity, they are no doubt inspired by the wonderful time we had together, and I am grateful to the Sobell Foundation, Decibels and Audiovisability for helping implement the original project.