



Theresa Easton graduated from the University of East London with a BA in Fine Art, specialising in printmaking, in 1998. She went on to complete an MA in Glass at the University of Sunderland in 2007.

She works predominantly as a printmaker, using a wide range of printing techniques for public art, artists' books and exhibitions.

"I use printmaking to engage with a wide variety of participants in a range of different settings. I think my specialist skills include working with hard-to-reach groups like NEETs, or working with young people through the Restorative Justice programme. I also enjoy working with older people too.

I think printmaking can really empower people, it can be a simple process and can help people achieve quite simple goals, giving them confidence and belief.

It can help them feel aspirational and shift focus from the negative to the positive.

I work hard in settings to put people at their ease, using language and processes that people can find accessible.

It's important to find a good theme to help with initial engagement. In taster workshops a good, simple theme is absolutely key, it helps people to feel at ease and appreciate that art is not elitist, or 'for somebody else.'

The Sunderland Book Project was a simple theme that everyone could get really quickly. It was about the history of the place, the language, the dialect, the history and heritage and memories. It also became quite political, and involved quite challenging issues. People from all over the world took part, it was easy to become involved.

People I worked with on the project helped to guide me as it was their project, their memories and attitudes.

During a long-term project like that I'll try to hold a person in my mind and remember one thing that they've said to me. I'll try to respond to that one thing the following week by taking something into the session that they've mentioned. This really helps bond them into the project and sessions. It helps people to realise I value them and their input – a lot of people I work with don't necessarily get that at home. It's about positive attachment.

I try to work in settings that are familiar and comfortable to people in the client group. I was working with a group from Tyneside Women's Health at a community centre where the women felt safe and secure, but embedded into that were visits to a more public space. I try to keep groups away from established educational centres, as clients often have had poor experiences at school and don't feel comfortable in those settings.

When I work with the Restorative Justice group, there isn't really a good space to work in. They're the same rooms in which the probation officers interview them. So I take in work they've completed in my sessions and pin it up all around the room to make it feel different and more comfortable. I even put some of the work into Ikea frames and they really value this, makes them feel special.

I really enjoy my work in participatory settings and it helps my work as an artist – it feeds into my work. It makes me think about what my artwork may communicate.

It can stretch me as I try to find something different to do with each group so I'm pushed to develop or look at new skills. My work can also be a response to something that's happened or been said in a session. But my own work is vitally important to me. I'm more of a facilitator than a teacher.

I would like the challenge of working in other settings. I've done a little bit of work in Low Newton Remand Centre and really enjoyed it and would like to do more in settings like that, which are really different to the norm. It was great working with the young offenders, trying to give them a skill they've never even thought about before and which will help them have a more positive outlook.

I'd like to work with women in prisons and more young people who have been incarcerated. I looked at a New York project which was using Artists' Books within the education system educating young people who'd been incarcerated. It worked really well and people in Boston were using similar practices. It's an interesting model and seemed to be making successful interventions.

One project that I'm particularly proud of was working with Restorative Justice groups in Sunderland. I think I managed the numbers well, though it was a challenge as the staff were undergoing major changes during the project. The brief was to help young people make sense of a regeneration project in Roker and come up with something that could be sold. I needed three lesson plans for each session because things were changing all the time. The group was made up of young people – boys and girls – aged between 13 and 17 and there were ten sessions in total. The result was the Roker Explorer Pack, which introduces visitors to the area and which the young people put together themselves. They are now being sold around the seafront.

There have been a couple of projects that I've been involved with that have been tricky or difficult, but I've always been happy to ask for support. One example was an intergenerational project that I employed a specialist to work alongside me to help evaluate the project as well as help me link the two audiences – young and old. I'm more of an artist and I know I need a bit of help with areas like evaluation.

I first got into working in participatory settings when I was parachuted in to help on a project a few years ago. I found out that I was almost expected to be a social worker as well, so I thought if this is what is expected, then the issues need to be properly embedded in the brief. So I really got into the work about three years ago when I started working with hard-to-reach groups.

There was an awareness that I wanted to do more of this, and it was almost about less of my skills as an artist, but the softer skills, the people skills which become just as important.

I now work with a whole host of organisations in these sort of settings – mums and toddlers' groups; pre-school children; primary school children; teenagers outside of school settings; youth services; museums (Beamish for example); third sector organisations; big arts organisations like BALTIC, as well as universities and colleges.

There wasn't really the opportunity to do this sort of work when I was at university. I organised my own work experience, but this was at a museum, and I wasn't really able to use my artistic skills. It did really help me learn how to talk to the public and improve my confidence.

That's one of the things about printmaking, it's more social than painting.

I haven't really been inspired by one particular person to do this sort of work, but I pick up lots of ideas and energy from people doing similar work regionally, nationally and internationally. Although I do remember speaking to the organisers of a photography course in Newcastle. They'd been doing some work with Chilean Solidarity who had been putting up work in launderettes. That inspired me, it got me thinking,

If anyone is thinking about doing this sort of work, I'd advise them to really think about why. One of my reasons for getting into it was that I never felt I really belonged growing up, I was never encouraged down the artistic route. I would also say get as much training as you possibly can – be that formal training, mentoring, shadowing or short courses. Pick up ideas, inspiration wherever you can.

I think there are big gaps in training and learning. Some students just don't appreciate the opportunity universities grant them – the excellent facilities and support of great teachers and lecturers. You've got to think about the finance too – can you afford to be an artist, is it a full-time job or a part-time role? The other thing is too many students don't have the right social skills for this type of work, they can't work as a team and don't relate to people well. You need empathy, not sympathy and this side of the work I do is vital to succeed.”