



Effie Burns is a glass artist who graduated from the University of Sunderland with a BA (hons) in 3D Design (glass and ceramics) in 1996. She went on to complete an MA in Art in Context from the same university in 1998.

She has lectured BA and MA students and is a Queen Elizabeth (QEST) scholar.

“Working in participatory settings is a journey, a process of discovery as an artist, it’s working with the unknown. Some people find it very challenging, I’ve always loved it. I don’t do it all the time as I have my own artistic work to do, and it can be exhausting, but it’s also hugely rewarding.

I’ve been lucky enough to work in all sorts of participatory settings. I worked right across the board in one Nottingham community – from allotment holders to knitting groups and schools.

I’ve also worked a lot with women’s groups in places like community groups. One of these was a Sunderland project concerned with healthy eating. I’ve just finished a job for Newcastle Library and the British Museum. This was an outreach programme, working with young people with mental-health problems.

I’ve done a lot with NEETs too.

I became aware that this was the sort of work for me when I was being mentored as part of my MA. I was looking at a community project involving Newcastle Quayside with a professional sculptor. She inspired me, she showed me what is possible with such projects. I’d never really considered or looked at such work before. My MA up to that point had been very materials-based, but this made me realise how important interactions with people could be.

I would like the chance to work in other settings. You get something different from every group you work with. I never repeat projects, never do the same thing twice so I’m always looking for something different, something new. Every project is specifically tailored to the group I’m working with.

I did a great project with Southwick School in Sunderland with a broad brief of 'doing something with history and getting boys to write better.' I like the creative-problem solving side of my work and enjoy helping clients and groups finding an artistic answer.

I am very proud of the work that I and three other partners from our Newcastle Cobalt Studios completed at Southwick School. It had to be a history-based project, but we wanted to give the children something different, to expand their horizons. The children were the experts in their area (geographic) as we were all from Newcastle. The children told us what they were interested in – then we took plenty of materials in as well as exploring the school to see what they had. The school was moving from an old school to another one and our work was marking the change. One thing we found was a Victorian punishment book, which was fascinating. The school did a lot of work in the community and we were party to that, with people bringing things in to us. We made things for them including two 'cupboards' which contained all sorts of artefacts related to the school and community's history. We made a tea service which was based on Sunderland pottery. People thought the children would very quickly smash the service, but they treated it with great care, and it's still going strong.

One project that was a bit harder was a Sir Thomas Bewick project funded by Newcastle Libraries. We were working in the libraries, and were given the brief to look at the libraries' collections and make something that people down in London would come up and write about. But we hardly had anytime to pull everything together. The project was only six days long, and one of these was spent down in London looking at collections down there. We were inspired by Bewick's collection of engravings and books to come up with an ark of animals. There was an element of the young people involved – from the Skimstone Arts Young Artist Collective – making up their own animal stories inspired from familiar legends and from the sea and landscapes. It needed to be an exhibition for young and old and this too needed thinking about. Thankfully, the library staff were both helpful and committed.

There isn't really a clear career path into the sort of work I do, but it's great and very varied. I've worked for the NHS, schools and colleges, art centres and the Northern Rock Foundation.

Because there isn't really training for the participatory work I do, I've essentially learned on the job. I've never met anyone where I've thought 'I wish I had your career.' It's not that sort of role. The individual projects I do have all been different and the inspiration and opportunities come from everywhere.

Anyone wanting to do what I'm doing in all the different settings must have good people skills. You have to understand what people want – what they are saying, and what they aren't saying.

But people are starting to see this participatory work as a valid option, as interesting work. I don't think it's being offered as a course, it's just developing. Artists working in participatory settings are the knowledge holders, so they need to spread their knowledge in more seminars and conferences.

It's interesting that whereas in other area of the Arts is drying up or had dried up, there still appears to be funding for this sort of work.”