



Tommy Anderson is a designer, animator, musician and arts facilitator. He graduated from the University of Teesside with a degree in Graphic Design in 1997.

After working as an in-house graphic designer for The Crack magazine, in 2002 he became a freelance designer and now works as an arts facilitator and teacher in several different settings, but particularly with young people. He is inspired by urban landscapes and people to produce artworks developed within creative community programmes.

“I work a lot with Youth Offending teams – I’ve done three years with Newcastle’s and I’m in to my third year with Gateshead. The young people I work with have a good go at everything. With 36 weeks of activity to fill I need a lot of different activities to do.

One interesting project I did last year was working with the Cyrenians based at Virginia House, Elswick. All the people we were working with had experienced homelessness or substance abuse. We did a lot of animation and music and they seemed to get a lot from it.

I also worked on an inter-generational project in Longbenton that involved four-year-olds to 80-year-olds. We were working with Yuill Homes who had big hoardings going up around a new housing development and wanted something interesting on the hoardings. It was a piece about the history and heritage of the area and we used a mixture of photography and typography. At the time I think it was the longest piece of art in the UK. Despite the fact that it was black type on a white background there was no – or very little graffiti. I think this was down to a sense of pride in the piece, but also a bit of ‘touch that and you’re dead.’ There was real ownership from those who worked on it.

The project really opened my eyes to a different use of my skills. My work in participatory settings has really grown from there. I've not made a conscious decision to develop the work, it's just happened. I wasn't actively seeking to work in participatory settings, it just sort of happened. It used to be an add-on, just something else I did, but now it's a big part of my practice.

One area I'd like to do more work in is with people with serious mental health issues. I've done a bit and found it really interesting and I'd just like to do more.

I think the project that I'm most proud of and the one that had the most impact was the animation and music work with the Cyrenians. I really enjoyed the mentoring side of this project and we had the time to work one-to-one with the young people, some of whom still ring for advice. It was great to work with them in Virginia House as that's where they feel settled and comfortable. The environment and location is really important in this sort of work.

Some of the work with the Youth Offending teams can be difficult where there are behavioural problems. It can depend on the support workers. If they're not dealing with problems it can become difficult.

I work with a great range of people and organisations. From Youth Offending teams to schools, colleges, the Design Council, the Arts Council. I've also done a lot of work with children in care, particularly for Durham County Council's children's services department.

There wasn't much chance to sample the sort of work I'm doing now while I was doing my degree. I didn't really know about it and you had to source your own work experience – I ended up as an in-house designer in South Wales for a month one summer.

I was working at the Crack magazine in Newcastle when a guy called Paul Summers introduced me to this sort of work. He brought me in to help him with a project so he got me into it, I suppose. He was my unofficial mentor, my guide. He was so enthusiastic and we'd talk about the work for ages. So I suppose I got into this work as an assistant and learnt a lot doing that for a while. Getting this sort of unpaid experience could help you into it as a career, or it could persuade you that this sort of work isn't for you. You can't just sit there, you have to contribute, not just observe.

I'd say to anyone thinking about this line of work that you have to be in it for the right reasons. It may help pay the bills, but it's also a huge commitment. You also have to be happy to work with real enthusiasm in a range of different settings, using different techniques and with a range of people. And you shouldn't expect huge levels of engagement. You're not going to get that sort of reaction immediately from most groups.

Working in participatory settings wasn't something mentioned at university, so I wonder if it might be a module that needs looking at. There isn't a structured way of getting into it, everyone finds their own way, though there is a community

of us out there. It's quite an inclusive, helpful network. Where there has been a decline in other forms of work, there's been no decline in this area for me.

It has also really helped me as an artist. I'm learning new things to work as a facilitator and this has developed me as an artist."