Ultra violet adventures in art

***Suzanne Little** reveals a simple way to bring art to life for those with visual impairments and complex needs*

Ultra violet (UV) light and fluorescent materials can provide a new and exciting way of experiencing art, especially for students with complex support needs. For students with visual impairment, UV light can open the door to enabling them to appreciate colour, and the results can be dramatic. The special effect of UV light used in a darkened room makes fluorescent colours stand out vibrantly. Any piece of art work, a painting or a 3D sculpture, is given extra visual depth through colour contrast. This intense use of colour enhances the process of making a picture and it can inspire a further interest in creating art, as the positive feedback of seeing a brilliantly coloured picture is instantly rewarding.

Creating a special art experience

This sense of being involved in creating something special was evident in my school, Meldreth Manor, at our recent art day, when all the students took part in a national special needs art competition. The majority of our students have cerebral palsy and visual impairment, and using UV light enabled them to be actively involved in seeing colour. For many students, this increased awareness of colour involved them more in making their own choices, and we are continuing to develop this approach for some art sessions, displays and exhibitions.

Inspiring colours

This is one student's story of how she found her inspiration with colour under UV light. Charlie is seventeen years of age and she loves to explore the world through her senses of vision and sound.

The UV light gave colours an intensity which enabled the students to engage their senses

She has cerebral palsy and cortical visual impairment, but this does not stop her from using her vision if she is given the opportunity to see colour. UV light enabled Charlie to be aware of vibrant fluorescent colours which opened up access to art for her.

When Charlie entered the art room it was dimly lit with a strange blue glow. The glow was created by three rectangular UV light panels which were placed around the room. Charlie was told that this was a special light to help her see colours and see what she painted. After a few minutes of adjusting to this new environment, Charlie was offered her two favourite colours, yellow and pink, and under the UV lights she gazed with amazement at the deep, glowing colours. When asked to choose a colour to begin painting, she clearly expressed her preference for pink by smiling and lifting her eyes. Charlie loved using her vision to locate the fluorescent pink and then the yellow.

Preparing the choices

Charlie had entered a classroom which had black-out blinds and was cleared of clutter. The UV light panels were positioned in corners around the room. These were fixed onto music stands which could be moved nearer to the students' work when required. Black, dark blue or dark green paper provided maximum contrast backgrounds and fluorescent paints in different colours were mixed with glue to give a consistency that would stick to the paper. The students were shown colours on large pieces of fluorescent material or paper to enable them to make choices. They were given time to work at their own pace, to make their own decisions, and to be involved in each stage of creating their art work.

Easels were placed at wheelchair height and at an angle for good visual access, though some students preferred using their trays to create their pictures. Charlie's classroom assistant offered her a stencil of circles as they were easy to explore with assistance. Charlie was helped to feel the circle shape by running her finger around the stencil and by the assistant making circular movements on her arm.

This technique can be enjoyed by any students with complex support needs

The next step was to find the preferred painting medium, from a choice of soft sponges, different types of brushes and/or fingers. Many students preferred using their fingers but Charlie did not like putting her fingers into paint, so she chose to explore other mediums. Charlie felt the sponge on her skin and the smooth brush handle in her fingers. She indicated by lifting her eyes that she preferred the small, smooth brush handle. As the UV light shone on the black paper on her easel, Charlie was assisted to reach the fluorescent paint and she began her work.

Opening the door to an art adventure

Charlie and the other students were involved in a multi-sensory experience involving choosing colour, feeling the texture of the paint and choosing the tools to paint with. The UV light gave colours an intensity which enabled the students to engage their senses of vision and touch throughout the whole process of creating their own artworks.

Without this special lighting, the students would not have had the same access to colour to make their own choices and many decisions would have been made for them. With the lighting, a new dramatic dimension was added which was enjoyed by students and staff alike and heightened involvement in the activity for all concerned.

This technique can be enjoyed by any students with complex support needs. If a dedicated room is not available, it can be practised in a corner of the classroom with a small UV tube. Similarly, a box could be painted in a dark colour with a small light attached inside it, or a UV torch could be shone onto the art work. The room does not need to be completely dark and the technique could work well in a curtained off section of the classroom, if necessary. Alternatively, joined and hinged dark coloured display boards can be folded into a three sided room shape for one or two students to sit inside and work upon. These boards can then be unfolded to produce an art exhibition with UV light in a darkened area.

With this simple technique, the magic begins when the UV lights are turned on and the paintings glow; it can be a wonderful experience for students and is a great way of making art fun and accessible. SEN

Further information

Suzanne Little is a specialist teacher at Meldreth Manor School, which is run by disability charity Scope:
www.scope.org.uk/education/meldreth.php