

Please cite the Published Version

Bunting, K and McCabe, O (2017) Feminism, the Vote and Youth Engagement: A Cheshire Case Study. In: Feminism and Museums: Intervention, Disruption and Change Volume 2. Museums Etc, pp. 401-415. ISBN 978-1-912528-00-4 (Unpublished)

Publisher: Museums Etc

Version: Published Version

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

FEMINISM, THE VOTE
AND YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Kirsty Bunting and Orlagh McCabe

THE LOCAL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT (LYE) project launched in November 2015 with the support of a small enterprise HEFCE UnLtd seed fund.¹ The LYE project works in collaboration with schools in and around Crewe offering interactive workshops which investigate and record how ideas of citizenship, gender equality and enfranchisement affect the lives of young people locally. Particular emphasis is placed on how young people identify themselves as politically dis/enfranchised and how they prepare for their first experiences of voting. The project was, in part, inspired by the forthcoming centenary of The Representation of the People Act (1918) – which granted (some) women the right to vote for the first time. With this focus of “representation” in mind, the workshops addressed the gender imbalance in political life (where in 2015 just 29% of MPs in UK Parliament were women) and in the current school curricula, which typically under-emphasises female narratives and achievements, often entirely overlooking those of intersectional women.

Anecdotal evidence from some of the LYE project’s teacher-participants suggest that masculinity dominates many aspects of the curriculum, and a teacher from one partner-school indicated that there were no female historical figures represented on their school curriculum at all. This is borne out nationally in the choices young people make at school. In 2007, the department for Education and Skills reported on the proliferation of stereotypical gender-divisive practices in pedagogy and curriculum design, with girls more likely to choose ‘girl-friendly’ arts, languages and humanities subjects. This has wider effects on young people, and girls in particular, when looking for role models in the public sphere. Overall, young people are disengaged when it comes to political participation and are sceptical



FIG. 1: Kirsty Bunting and Orlagh McCabe facilitate a school workshop.

of formal political processes (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000). In adulthood though, women in particular are less likely to engage in political interactions and debate than their male counterparts (Wolak and McDevitt, 2011), and are seen as less politically engaged (Coffé and Bolzendahl, 2010).

The LYE project school workshops were designed with this in mind, choosing as its focal point the author, suffragist and working women's rights campaigner, Ada Nield Chew, who lived and worked in and around Crewe, Cheshire and the North of England and first came to national attention following her letter writing campaign to the *Crewe Chronicle* newspaper in 1894. The project HQ is in Crewe; a town most noted for its industrial heritage and luxury car production, and for being a major railway junction. Crewe's demography and its context of urban regeneration inspired the LYE project's aims. At the last census, 46.8% of the population of Crewe were aged 16 to 24, largely due to the presence of a major northwest higher education provider in the town (ONS, 2011). This large youth population is especially significant when considering that, nationally, only 43% of 18 to 24 year-olds voted in the 2015 general election.

The case study

Elements of the LYE project constitute a feminist curatorial project as each workshop results in student-participants creating artistic responses, in a range of media, which are currently being exhibited across the North West on pop-up travelling display boards (with its accompanying visitors' comments book and, occasionally, a guided interactive creative activity for visitors to the exhibition to try their hand at). The portability of this exhibition is particularly important and relevant

for its target audience.

What follows describes the process of curating the exhibition, with reflections on the visual aspects of the project and the purpose and impact of these creative elements. Also included are samples from the data that the project has gathered during school workshops (as well as public engagement events with adults locally) in an attempt to evaluate the influence and future direction of the LYE project.

The school workshops

Since November 2015, 500 young people between the ages of 11 and 16 have attended the project's school workshops, which follow this format: sessions begin with the workshop leaders disseminating information about Ada Nield Chew and her connections to Crewe and the local area. They briefly document her life after she was dismissed from Crewe's Compton Brothers clothing factory for inciting dissent amongst the workforce. Participants learn about Ada's work with the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) and unpack the differences between the suffragists' peaceful protest methods and the suffragettes' more militant tactics. Participants watch a film (commissioned by LYE project) of Manchester Metropolitan University Contemporary Arts graduate Emmie Alderson reimagining a 24 year-old Ada Nield writing her first protest letter. Having started thinking about women's rights at the turn of the twentieth century, everyone is ready to begin the discussion section of the workshop. Students are encouraged to share their views on the status of women and girls in the region today and everyone reflects on how things might have changed nationally since equal voting rights were granted in

1928 and the ways in which young people today can participate in civic and political life, now and as they get older.

Active discussion is encouraged by using a range of classroom materials, including sticky notes and large format ideas boards, which leave a tangible record of the discussion content. Each session culminates with participants having one hour to create artistic responses to any aspect of the workshop that has captured their imagination, often writing songs, poems or letters or making banners, posters and cartoons. The students know in advance that these may feature in the project's exhibition. The exhibition comprises free-standing folding display panels, roughly 4m² when complete.

Curating the exhibition

It was difficult to choose what to include, having only limited space to display the students' responses so there was an element of selecting the most eye-catching and boldest creations. Many were inspired by the visual idiom of suffrage protest banners, sashes and rosettes, replicating the movement's slogans in bright colours; some simply read, *VOTES FOR WOMEN*. A large origami love-heart stood out immediately as it encourages viewers to interact with it, requiring them to reach out to open the heart in order to discover the messages inside that say, *Fight for Rights!*, *Fight Till The End!* and *Be Strong*.

Many chose creative writing responses, and these too are included in the exhibition, encouraging viewers to stay longer. One reads like a letter to a newspaper and warns of the violence to come: *We want the vote and we are going to get it. We're risking our lives*. It is signed, *Regards, the Suffragettes*. There is some humour and a lot of pride and vitality in all of the responses,



FIG. 2: One of the hundreds of creative responses inspired by the project's school workshops.

but they also demonstrate that learning has taken place. Some artwork sets out to explain the differences between the tactics of the suffragettes and the suffragists, others timeline key moments in the fight for the vote, or depict scenes of protest, arrest, imprisonment and the force feeding of hunger-strikers, highlighting the indelibility and viscosity of their learning experience. The responses also demonstrate that some students had questioned or reflected upon their contemporaneous subjectivity as young people facing social and gender inequalities. A hand-drawn pamphlet by a girl, aged thirteen, is headed, *Modern day sexism: why we're still not equal*, and charts her perceptions of how the play, clothing, and social interactions of boys and girls are separated and gendered from birth.

In addition to these creative responses, the exhibition also includes information panels on Ada Nield Chew, extracts from her protest writing, images of Chew speaking from her Clarion Van in the 1890s and at the hustings of a Crewe by-election in 1912, as well as newspaper clippings about the LYE explaining the aims of the workshops.

Responses to the exhibition

Since November 2015 and Spring 2017 the exhibition has been displayed at International Women's Day events at Crewe public library and at the People's History Museum, Salford (the Women in the First World War Symposium, part of the Wonder Women Festival 2016); a local further education college's community fun day; the *Crewe Chronicle* community day, a university apprenticeships fair (MMU Cheshire, Feb 2017); a Crewe Town Council mayor-making ceremony and public meeting; and, finally, at the LYE Project's community conference (The



FIG. 3: An interactive origami heart made by schoolgirl.

Women and Girls of Crewe, the North of England and Beyond, 1830 to 2016) which took place at MMU Cheshire on 7 December 2016, and which was attended by over 150 delegates, including community partners and schoolchildren who had previously taken part in a workshop. These events were free and open to the public and audiences of children, young people and adults. Some included optional rosette making activities where visitors were encouraged to write a slogan or to draw a cause, object or person close to their hearts, these were then pinned onto the exhibition boards, becoming part of it.

The exhibition Comments Book gives a good summation of the exhibition's function, value and impact. Following are exhibition visitors' comments collated between December 2016 and February 2017:

It has given me a lot of background information on suffrage and 19th century women, which is extremely interesting for my own research.

It is interesting to know what women have done in history for women's rights.

Interesting to learn about the vast number of suffragists, women apart from the Pankhursts.

I learnt that there is such a huge range of local research & so much to know!

Learned about early Labour and Trade Union links with Crewe and suffrage.

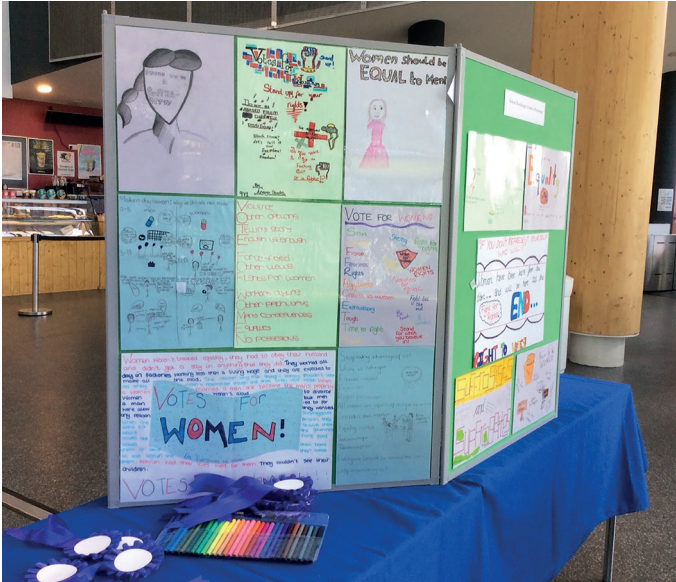


FIG. 4: Exhibition panels at a further education local college community open day.

Lots to go away and think about.

Lots of Passion.

Beautiful. Thoughtful and thought provoking work,
thank you.

Some of these community engagement events encouraged visitors to reflect on what Ada Nield Chew might think about the lives of women today or to *Write a Message to Ada* on sticky notes. These too were incorporated into the display boards on the day.

What would Ada Nield Chew think about the lives of women today?

We now have a minimum wage.

There is too much wage inequality today.

Women are still second in the queue when the jobs are handed out.

Some great work, but don't rest on your laurels.

More work is needed to engage young women. It's ongoing.

Write a message for Ada Nield Chew.

Women are much more equal to men compared to how they were then.

We will keep up your good work.

A woman before her time.



FIG. 5: Primary school children's rosettes, made at The Children's Rights Conference, MMU Cheshire, 6 November 2015.

Ada you are an amazing woman and should be proud of what you did.

You've not been forgotten.

Thank you Ada for giving us a choice.

Well done!! Such courage. Thank you for all you gave us xx.

Thank you for your work – I pledge to continue and support what you did.

Still need to campaign for rights.

It's still a man's world. We will continue to break down barriers.

The impact

The sentiments behind these comments demonstrate warmth and admiration for Ada Nield Chew. By reminding local people about one historical figure who walked, worked and protested in their own town, and showing them pictures of her in places familiar to locals, as well as presenting the artwork responses outlining the hopes, fears and aspirations of their local youth, personal associations are awakened, and reflection takes place.

For many of the young people who engaged with the workshops, they were provided an opportunity to consider their own sense of self, place, civic identity and agency. In a society where gender inequality persists and the absence of women's political interest and efficacy in politics provides an explanation for their lack of participation (Verba *et al*, 1997) the LYE workshops afford a space for considerations of gender, politics and women's rights, resulting in a strengthening of personal narratives.

The LYE project and exhibition is a simple inexpensive model offering a framework for successful youth engagement,

which could be replicated by other groups or individuals. Ada Nield Chew was just one of an international network of early feminists: how many other ground-breaking figures like Ada go unremembered in their hometowns and in the sites of their activism today? If every school or university went in search of their own local feminist pioneer, how many role-models would be remembered, researched and celebrated? For now, Ada Nield Chew's writing continues to be read and her image replicated, she continues to inspire the voters and policy makers of the future, her name is still spoken amongst her community and her legacy continues.

NOTE

1. HEFCE: Higher Education Funding Council for England.

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