



AMERICAN TAPESTRY ALLIANCE

## Encouraging children to weave

Sally Reckert

I am relatively new to tapestry and am not a teacher, so on reading about the ATA's new grant, *Weaving the Future*, my heart and imagination leaped at the word 'facilitator.' Previously my workshops had been as a gardener and craftmaker. I knew I wanted Janet Clark<sup>[i]</sup> to teach me to facilitate tapestry weaving for children of all ages, so I emailed her the application details. I must explain why I use the phrase 'children of all ages.' In Britain we are not allowed to work with children or vulnerable adults without a certificate from the Disclosure and Barring Services.<sup>[ii]</sup> For someone like me, who gives workshops informally and infrequently, this is not a viable option. However, having guardians and/or project workers alongside the children is a legitimate alternative. It also means that the adults can continue the activity after the workshop, and I have a conduit to pass on the materials.

Poverty, and often lack of parental interest, is an issue all through the first world. Many of the children I've worked with here in the North East of England have neither the materials nor the opportunity to be creative, but they do have imagination. For a number of years, I've worked with 'young carers,' their ages ranging from 5 to 8 years old. Despite acting as surrogate parents for younger siblings and caring for their own parents, the children have a 'can do' attitude and open curiosity, which taught me how to work alongside them.

I discovered tapestry when I applied for a weaversbazaar<sup>[iii]</sup> community bursary for the young carers. This British company has a tantalizing range of yarn colors, including gorgeously dyed nettle, intriguing for children whose experience gardening with me was that nettles were boring and they stung.



*Volunteer with young carer. Tees Valley YMCA, Darlington, County Durham, England. Photo: Sally Reckert*

From these children, I discovered three essentials for continuing their new-found creativity at home.

1) Use well-made, appropriately sized equipment. Janet had generously made over the entire ATA grant to me, and with some of the money I was able to buy two good-quality Mirrix looms to add to the two I already had. The alternative of a cheaply made 10-for-the-price-of-6 pack was not an option. Children quickly understand the tensile strength needed by a loom under warp tension when a cheap one breaks! Armed with this knowledge, children can scavenge and beg sturdy picture frames from friends, dumpsters, and local woodworking companies.

2) Use and share your own favorite materials. With the *Weaving the Future* grant I bought yarns with interesting story possibilities: seaweed (SeaCell); tussah silk noile; nettle; milk; bamboo; paper; wool from animals such as Teesdale sheep, a local breed with soft Rasta curls; camel- and horse-hair. Few of the young carers had been outside their home town, but in their imaginations they could now travel the world. In return they shared their favorite found materials, adding strange new colors and textures to our collective imaginations and creativity.

3) Involve the children in practical issues so they know they are helping to make a difference. Where will their tapestries hang? How can they be used? Poignantly, many times the young

carers' tapestries became gifts for parents from whom they'd been removed due to neglect or abuse.

Having gained experience with a known project group, the young carers, I felt ready to start working with children of all ages who were strangers to me. I knew I needed to be a step ahead of them. I'm confident with color and texture, but needed to learn how to demonstrate technique. I also wanted to continue from where I feel most comfortable, leading from behind, so I chose textured weaving. Why this particular style of weaving? Because it gave me the confidence not to worry if, for instance, warps got jumped. Some children want to know why it's gone wrong and how they can correct it, others prefer to carry on, unaware there is a mistake. Talking with the child I can find out the story or pattern in their mind and work with them past the 'mistake.'



*Janet Clark teaching Sally Reckert, The Weaving Rooms, Darlington. Photo: Jane Riley.*

Janet Clark learned textured weaving from William Jefferies<sup>[iv]</sup> and was now going to pass his technique on to me. The ATA grant enabled Janet to travel from Huddersfield, on the west side of the Pennines, to where I live on the east side. Janet is an excellent teacher: knowledgeable,

technically clear, patient in her instruction. Daunted by her skills I had to remind myself that my role was to facilitate and not teach weaving to children.

I now had materials and had been taught a skill to pass on. How would I fare with a group of children, all chattering and getting tied up in knots? Would they understand what I was trying to show them? I needed willing guinea pigs to practise with.

Children today are not shy in coming forward with their 'constructive' suggestions, and after several sessions with different groups I found that few of them wanted to weave for the sake of it – they wanted an outcome in one hour! The quickest and easiest end result was a greeting card. We made 6" cardboard looms on which they collaged colored paper. I then photographed and edited these to grey scale so they could see tonal values and pattern – how marvelous technology can be! Once satisfied with their collage results they almost all wanted to use them as cartoons.

I was now ready for large groups of unknown children of all ages at festivals and fairs, working collectively on either a 6' square pipe loom or a hazel loom warped with sisal. Both these looms gave space to everyone who wanted to weave – and how fascinating their stories were as they wove them into the tapestry: older men showing their grandchildren the knots they'd used as dockers and truckers; a grandmother sharing her childhood tips for weaving the branches of a den with her grandchild; bashful fathers being shown how to braid colored threads by their daughters, proud in their newly braided hair. I was a facilitator of young weavers, an enabler for their stories in tapestry.



*Festival of Thrift. Kirkleatham, County Durham, 2017. Photo: Sally Reckert.*



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For me, weaving with children is little different to gardening with them. With good materials, and a real value placed on their work, children's imaginations will soar. The little boy in the photograph saw the tapestry as a jungle that he'd seen in Vietnam. The festival where I was encouraging children of all ages to weave was heaving with crowds, but throughout the weekend he kept coming back with his grandmother to add more 'animals' to his jungle. Where to next? I shall continue encouraging creative confidence in children from deprived backgrounds through tapestry weaving. And, in turn, I now have a *Weaving the Future* grant so that I can pass on my experience to two more people, Leslie Fox and Emma Wheatman. Leslie would like to return to Belize and share his hand weaving knowledge with the village community and its children. Emma, who co-directs BloominArt, [\[v\]](#) a community art group in Teesside, has begun to experiment with using tapestry as a way of engaging children:



*Woodhorn Museum, Northumberland, 2016. Photo: Emma Wheatman.*

“At Woodhorn Museum, I collaborated in a one-day, drop-in workshop responding to the Museum’s coastline photography exhibition. Four large table-top looms were set up. To reflect the imagery and atmosphere of the photography exhibition, coarse fishing wire was used for the warp. The weft was made up of materials often found on the coastline such as driftwood, shells, seaweed, plastic bags, string, wool and items of clothing. The activity encouraged families to work collaboratively in selecting and weaving with the materials of different size and texture. People were free to leave the activity at any stage, allowing random loose materials



either to hang, creating moving elements, or to be picked up by the next participant. The completed (loosely termed) ‘tapestries’ were later exhibited in the museum.” Emma Wheatman Sally Reckert is a facilitator and tapestry weaver living in the United Kingdom.

[i] Janet Clark <http://www.janetclark.co.uk>

[ii] DBS <https://www.gov.uk/dbs-update-service>

[iii] Weaversbazaar <https://www.weaversbazaar.com/services/sponsorship/>

[iv] William Jefferies V&A, London <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/pdf/O121862/march-diver-tapestry-jefferies-william/>

[v] BloominArt <http://www.bloominart.co.uk/index.html>