

Artspace Approach Evaluation

Includes:
Final Research Report
Bibliography

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Abstract:

This paper is the researcher's account of the Artspace Critical Publications Developer project. In order to foster an atmosphere conducive to the exchange of ideas, the purpose of the project was to develop a model for a critical written component of Artspace programming, and to expand to new audiences. This evaluation details how the researcher believed the fluid, relaxed Artspace atmosphere and corresponding nature of the staff influenced her ability to meet these objectives. Specifically, she felt a sense of freedom and independence when pursuing avenues of the project, yet this was countered by ambiguity surrounding the project's stated objectives, and a lack of direction. The evaluation also describes the tasks undertaken by the researcher, namely article writing for advertising purposes, planning for events such as art exhibitions and art classes, and academic writing, including an annotated bibliography, event and planning report, and a survey report.



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Approach Evaluation:

Final Report on Trent Centre for Community-Based Education Placement with Artspace

Introduction

I would like to begin the discussion of my placement with Artspace by saying that the experience was immensely rewarding and definitely some of the most valuable education I received during my time at university. It was challenging, rigorous and exhausting and I learned a variety of skills and took on a great deal of responsibility for my own learning process. I learned about art, about administration, about non-profit organizations, about event planning, and about writing, among other things. The project allowed me to associate myself with Artspace and to work as a kind of ambassador for the organization in the student community. As such, I also learned about public relations and promotion and about how challenging it can be for an arts organization to attract new audience members and engage with diverse sectors of its community.

Approaching Artspace

I will proceed with my discussion and evaluation of my placement with Artspace by focusing on the various aspects of the work I did this year and examining each of them

in turn to explain what they offered in terms of my experience. First, however, I will briefly mention what it was like initially to enter into the relationship which I developed with Artspace. Looking back on my early impressions of the Artspace is helpful to understanding some of what I later learned about the way that the organization is perceived by some parts of the community, and how these perceptions make engaging with a wide audience challenging. One of my first thoughts was “I don’t know anything about art”. I was interested in working with Artspace through the Trent Centre project, but I also felt intimidated about approaching an ‘artist-run centre’—I had never heard of such a thing before. I feared that perhaps someone as uninitiated as I had no business there. It took some time to adapt to the way the organization ran and there were moments when I felt out of place and unsure of the protocol (a ‘committee meeting’ which turned into hanging around the office drinking left over wine from the exhibition opening of previous evening comes to mind). Eventually, however, I grew to feel familiar and comfortable with the organization and the flying-by-the-seat-of-our-pants spirit of things which sometimes reigns there, something which is perhaps not uncommon for non-profits.

The environment in which I did my placement, and indeed the project itself, were thus suffused with a kind of fluidity which perhaps would have been absent from other projects such as a placement writing a history of a local church. This fluidity was a double-edged sword in the sense that it allowed me a great deal of freedom to direct my own activities but also at times made my direction and purpose within the organization feel unclear.

The Trent Centre/ Artspace Contract

It may perhaps be a useful place to start the evaluation of the project by focusing briefly on the contract drawn up at the beginning to set goals and state the purpose of my placement. The purpose of the project was defined in the contract as follows:

“to develop a model for a critical written component of Artspace’s programming by identifying content of currency to its activities, Trent University curricula, and the community at large, thereby developing a dialogue within our community. Hence this project is crucial to addressing the first two mandate objectives of Artspace, “cultivating an exchange of ideas” by including new audiences and providing a space for written critical discourse”.

While these objectives seem sensible for a community arts organization, it is perhaps rather vague as to how these objectives were meant to translate into a student project. This project thus required me to be very self-directed and to create events, project, etc. within my larger project which I thought would address the goals that Artspace intended for the placement. The open-ended nature of the project also seems apparent in the following wording, also from the contract:

“In the longer term the result of this project will be measured by the development of critical forums in various media, and reflected by the development of a “critical mass” from within our community”.

It thus was my task to set about trying to create this “critical mass”. Initially, it felt rather unclear to me as to how, exactly, I was going to do this. As I mentioned earlier, my relationship with Artspace had a definite fluid quality to it, as did the project itself, and

this meant that I was very much in charge of my activities and the education I was to get from them—more so, perhaps, than ever in my life before. From the wordiness and academic language of the contract, I discerned that my task was primarily to attempt to forge a relationship between Artspace and the student community at Trent. I therefore oriented my work towards promoting Artspace's activities and raising awareness of the organization among the student population. These activities—writing articles about Artspace exhibitions, organizing combined student and Artspace-member art shows, arranging art classes—all fell within the goals of the project and, I think, worked in small ways towards the overarching purpose of the placement. I will now focus on these various activities to evaluate the role they played in the placement experience.

The Articles

Over the course of the academic year, I submitted six articles to Trent's student newspaper, *Arthur*: four of them about Artspace exhibitions and two regarding Artspace events. Writing these articles was one of the most valuable, interesting and rewarding parts of the project for me. This part of the placement challenged me to learn how to be an interviewer, a journalist and an art critic. The articles allowed me to feel that I was educating myself and using what I learned to educate others about cultural experiences available here in our community. That earlier thought "I don't know anything about art" repeated itself over and over, each time I set out to conduct an interview or write an article. And each time I did these things, I engaged with the art, I listened to the artist and I had the opportunity to think critically about the material and about what I heard. I formed opinions about the exhibitions and offered my evaluation of them to the student

community, while promoting the presence of Artspace through student media. This process was definitely beneficial for me, as I gained skills as an interviewer and a writer. It was also, I believe, beneficial for Artspace because it provided part of the “critical discourse” surrounding some of its activities.

The Events

Over the course of my project with Artspace, I planned two events, both of which were art shows which combined the artwork of Artspace members and Trent students. These shows were both held on Trent University’s Symons Campus and were intended to raise the student population’s awareness of Artspace and to showcase the talent of student artists alongside that of community members.

The first of these shows was entitled “Watch This (Art)space” and took place in October, 2001 at Champlain College’s Great Hall. The show included painting, drawing, sculpture, and theatrical, musical and dance performance. The planning of the event was an exhausting process and an exercise in promotion, volunteer coordination, fundraising, site management and advertising. I had to learn how to write a ‘call for submissions’ to attract students and Artspace members to submit their work, navigate the channels of Trent University bureaucracy in order to secure a space for the show and arrange for security and staff for the Great Hall and the Ceilie, create ads for media like Arthur and the Peterborough Arts Umbrella’s The Brolly and posters and handbills for distribution on campus and downtown, manage all the phone calls and emails from prospective artists and performers, create a schedule for the day’s events, and recruit and provide support for volunteers for the day of the art fair. It was an incredible amount of work and an

immensely stressful process. It was also a very educational experience which required me to take on a lot of responsibility and from which I gained a lot of organizing and management skills which I was able to use and develop further during the second art show that I organized.

The second art show I planned to appear along with the performances of Eve Ensler's Vagina Monologues during mid-February 2002. It was entitled "Vaginas Are Cool!" and was set up in Ottonabee College outside the Wenjack theatre during the three evenings that the performances were held. This show was a much smaller event than the previous one, but required much of the same work on my part. I solicited submissions from students and Artspace members, recruited volunteers to help me with set-up and take-down, arranged for space and took care of security concerns and promoted Artspace and made literature regarding exhibitions available at the show. Perhaps more than the first show, "Vaginas Are Cool!" was effective in reaching a significant amount of people by virtue of its association with the Vagina Monologues event and thus gaining access to the large audiences the performances attracted. Planning these events was a very useful experience for me as it gave me the opportunity to develop skills as an organizer which I will be able to apply in countless possible contexts in the future for either career or volunteer-related work. The events also, I think, contributed in a small way to raising the student population's awareness of Artspace by drawing attention to the artistic presence in the community in general by bringing art and performance to Trent's campus while promoting the organization.

Academic Work

The academic work which I was required to do for my placement with Artspace was, truth be told, my least favourite part of the experience as a whole. This is not to say that it was not useful. The annotated bibliography in which I focused on the challenge of attracting new audiences to arts organizations and the role of the arts in community development helped me to contextualize my work at Artspace in Peterborough in the larger area of arts administration and allowed me to think about the relationship between community and the arts. The event-planning report which I wrote regarding the first art fair was similarly useful because it required me to look carefully at the purpose and meaning of the event and to evaluate its impact. The survey report which comprised the third portion of my academic work was also worthwhile because it gave me the opportunity to apply the interview skills which I had acquired previously during my placement to interviews with people who attended exhibitions. By conducting these interviews and evaluating what I heard from a group of 15 people I was able to discover some of the perceptions of Artspace and to tap into some suggestions as to how the organization might widen its audience.

My main concern with regard to the academic work for the project was that it was the sole source of my mark for the course. Perhaps because of the particular nature of the placement with Artspace, the academic work was done mostly for the purposes of the instructor and the grade evaluation, rather than for the organization itself. As such, the course work often seemed rather divorced from the work I was doing at Artspace and felt like extra tasks rather than something which complemented my activities there. This was also difficult in terms of time constraints, since my activities at Artspace were

extremely labour-intensive and time-consuming themselves. Unlike other T.C.C.B.E. projects in which the academic work is produced both for the organization and the instructor, there was a greater division between the academic requirements side and the community organization side of things with my project. This is problematic in my view particularly because my considerable efforts with regard to the work I did with Artspace are not necessarily reflected in the grade I will receive for the course, which is based solely on the academic work. However, I think that perhaps the difficulties surrounding this issue could be resolved, if the project were to be repeated, by setting course objectives to correspond closely to the activities with Artspace and by maintaining a more rigid time-line in which the course work would be produced within a shorter time-frame following the events and activities which the student undertakes at Artspace.

Conclusions

Overall, the experience of this project was very beneficial for me. I feel that I gained a great many skills and developed abilities I already had and used them practically. I was also able to do this in a context which made me feel attached to an organization and a member of the community. The work I was doing was not purely for abstract academic purposes, but was intended to benefit a non-profit organization and to enhance the cultural life of students and other community members. As such, this experience added to my skill set and my knowledge and gave me the opportunity both to learn and to use my education to engage with the world around me and to benefit my community.

I hope that the placement was similarly beneficial for Artspace. I think that my presence within the organization did generate some interest about Artspace among other

students and I think I did something to raise students' awareness of its existence. I would recommend that the project be repeated to continue this process.

