198 Gallery Case Study: **Excelerate**

1 **Summary**

*Excelerate* was developed in Spring 2006 by 198 Gallery as a way to involve a group of young people attending Urban Vision, our digital media education programme, more deeply in our work. The project, which gave participants a chance to get involved in exhibition management, built on a long history of providing volunteering opportunities in the creative and cultural industries for people from BME communities.

*Excelerate* explored how young people could contribute to the exhibition programme by nurturing and developing their talents, ambitions and enthusiasm. It has helped us see how a continuing work placement programme could be developed, the activities that suited Urban Vision participants, the management required and the benefits that it can bring to those who take part.

2 **The context**

2.1 **The organisation**

198 Gallery, founded as Roots Community, was established after the Brixton riots as a space for the Caribbean community; over time it has become a valued showcase for local and national Black visual artists. The Gallery is embedded in the community and has taken its exhibitions and projects from the ‘Front-line’ of Railton Road into the international visual arts arena. 198 also aims to lead creative synergies between professional artists, young people and the community and to develop work that investigates the cultural hybridisation induced by economic change, migration and its effects on British society. The programme encourages and uses interaction between different cultures, generations and social backgrounds as a creative catalyst.

Supported by funding from the London Borough of Lambeth and the Association of London Government, the gallery has also received project funding from Arts Council England. In 18 years, it has grown from one room and a yard into a professional exhibition space with two galleries and a new media studio, housing the Urban Vision Education Programme.

Urban Vision offers young creatives (aged 13-19) the opportunity to access, through new media arts, a platform to express their ideas and opinions. Most participants are outside of mainstream education and are referred by partner organisations including Lambeth Youth Offending
Team, Connexions or pupil exclusion units. Others come along independently or are introduced by family or friends. They stay for varying periods, building portfolios, gaining accreditation and working towards goals that might involve creative courses in further education. SRB, DfES, the lottery, trusts and foundations all fund Urban Vision; annual turnover averages around £220,000. There are seven staff, artists, and volunteers, managed by a Board of Trustees.

2.2 The situation

Excelerate was motivated by the continuing aim to integrate the exhibition programme and Urban Vision by connecting the creativity of all participants – from professional artist to young offender – and by our commitment to new and experimental approaches in our work.

The exhibition programme has provided the stimulus for education work at 198 since the early 1990s. The exhibitions have often presented issue-based work that has been the starting point for interpretation and exploration by young people. Exhibiting artists have remained central to the process through artist in residence programmes, a schools workshop programme and more recently through the Black Angels project and Urban Vision.

Using artists’ and their work to inspire and motivate young people is well established, but Excelerate aimed to give young people more responsibility and allow the artistic programme to benefit from their ideas and energy. The gallery also has a long history of working with volunteers, providing work experience to young curators and arts administrators from BME backgrounds who have gone on to key positions in mainstream arts organisations. This project would provide the opportunity for a different kind of young people to get involved in exhibitions.

In the past year, a synergy has begun to emerge between these two areas, influenced in part by a partnership with Live magazine, a publication produced by young people for young people. This has shown how much young people get out of ‘real’ experiences and launched the idea of using the exhibition programme as a professional workspace environment.

2.3 The idea

Excelerate (Urban Vision workspace) was therefore designed as a series of work placements where young people attending Urban Vision would take on the roles that volunteers usually fulfil in the exhibition programme. We hoped that this closer integration would lead to increased respect, interest, communication and understanding between artists, gallery staff and
young people, and that a feeling of ownership over the programme would lead to a greater attendance at the private views. We viewed the project as a pilot that would inform the future involvement of Urban Vision participants in the exhibition programme.

3. The project

3.1 Planning
We had been thinking about creating a young people’s committee to direct their involvement in the organisation and enable them to manage their own projects for some time. Excelerate was the ideal opportunity and so staff and young people got together to plan a number of work placements. We chose tasks that would usually be done by volunteers, such as exhibition installation, curatorial consultancy, PR, marketing and event management. But we also included new areas that drew on Urban Vision’s digital media focus, including the design and production of promotional materials, posters, photographic documentation, and web page design. The Urban Vision Project Manager was responsible for co-ordination, while other staff supervised young people in their area of work. Job descriptions were produced with participants, and everyone was matched as far as possible with areas of interest or skill.

See appendix

3.1 Delivery
The project took place during the ‘Three Cornerstones’ exhibition (9th March to 14th April 2006). The exhibition included work by Emmanuel Okoro (sculptor), Papa Essel (painter) and Chris Bramble (ceramicist). Activities started during the exhibition installation period and continued until 27th April 2006, after the opening of the following exhibition (‘SecretLab’ by Doze); some work also took place on an exhibition held later in the year (‘Hidden Scars’ by Everlyn Nicodemus).

The participant’s involvement varied between two days and two weeks depending on availability, the area of work and their level of commitment. From the start, when some participants had to pull out because of home commitments, there were unanticipated incidents that had an impact on the project.

One person was excluded from the Exclusion Unit he attended and we were told he was not allowed to take part in the project. As Urban Vision was his main source of education prior to attending the Exclusion Unit, and since the programme demands hard work and discipline, we decided to give him the chance to do the placement at a future date.
Another young man was involved in a gang incident that led to police arrest; though he continued to participate he was unable to focus properly. Finally, due to an oversight in project planning, the review for *Live* magazine did not meet the production deadlines; that piece was delayed until the next edition.

4 Outcomes

4.1 Impact on participants

Most participants had no prior experience of working in the creative industries, apart from two who had been working at *Live* magazine. Most had been keen to learn and to work with people inside and outside of the gallery. They wanted to increase their communication skills, especially with adults who were not teachers or family members, and learn skills they could use in future. Our evaluation showed that the project did build good communications and help them see staff as approachable. See appendix

The young people found the project challenging to varying degrees and enjoyed the sense of responsibility of being in a professional working environment with real outcomes. Some worked with more seriousness than others, and some needed more supervision and management. The results were most positive where the activity related to their interests or studies such as the placements in graphic design and web page design. The artists enthusiastically received Corrine’s outstanding designs for the exhibition publicity materials. Similarly Marcus worked hard to master the technical skills required to update the gallery website – beyond expectations. Both produced work for their portfolios and had experiences they can discuss at college interviews.

Other participants had more mixed success. One used her previous experience at *Live* magazine to produce an excellent press release, but found follow-up phone calls difficult. She lacked confidence in speaking to journalists, and was unsure what she was trying to achieve, so she was often offered advertising space rather than editorial coverage. While some participants’ abilities had been underestimated, her manager had overestimated her prior knowledge and experience.

The participants’ sense of ownership produced more interest in the two exhibitions: most young people were attending an opening for the first time. They asked questions about the work being shown and engaged artists in discussion about their work.

Although participants were paid expenses according to the gallery’s volunteer policy they were all keen to take part before knowing this. All of them
reported that the experience had been positive and that they would be interested in further work placements.

4.2 **Impact on others involved**
Staff and partners felt that the project was both beneficial and challenging. Urban Vision staff were pleased that other gallery staff had the opportunity to experience working with young people directly, feeling that it was important for all staff to understand the frustrations and pleasures of working with young people. As a result there is greater empathy with the work done by Urban Vision. All staff felt their communication with young people was improved by the project.

Staff found that they had both under- and over-estimated the ability of young people. There were sometimes difficulties giving appropriate support on top of their existing workload, so that the young people who were more able sometimes received more attention and gained more than those who were less confident. Staff felt it was essential to give young people responsibility and not to prejudge their abilities. Ideally, the project would give enough support to the young people while not placing excessive demands on staff. This did not happen for two participants who had successfully undertaken earlier projects: in this case, inadequate supervision failed to pick up that they were struggling to cope with their tasks.

4.3 **Institutional change**
The project led to recognition that the exhibition programme can benefit from Urban Vision, and that the young creatives are an unexplored and under used resource. We have seen that we have a changing pool of talent and enthusiasm that can contribute to the programme, and extend the central role of volunteers to the organisation. It also gives young people the ‘real’ experiences they want to help them move forward with their careers and shows that their contribution is valued and recognised.

5 **Lessons learned**

5.1 **What worked and what didn’t**
1. We made the right choice of individuals for most placements, sometimes leading to exceptionally high standard outcomes.
2. We were partly successful in identifying the right level of support for participants.
3. The right level of responsibility was given to the young people and this led to a sense of ownership of the project.
4. The project did increase interest in the artists’ work and attendance at events as a result of greater involvement in the management of the exhibition programme.

5. We maintained a flexible approach that was able to deal with unexpected issues.

5.2 Practical tips

1. Take the time to match the right people to the right jobs, taking into consideration previous experiences, interests and existing skills.

2. Give young people responsibility and the opportunity to get involved in activities with ‘real outcomes’, which will involve problem solving with appropriate supervision.

3. Make sure that young people feel supported and comfortable enough to speak and communicate what’s going on with them; silence might result from lack of confidence rather than from things going well.

4. Present a clear structure and check levels of understanding on a regular basis – don’t take it for granted that participants understand.

5. Try not to over- or under-estimate people’s ability based on past performance; they and their situations are always changing.

6. Be prepared to take on board decisions made by external partners, which may impact on the project and result in a change of plan.

5.3 Next steps

The project has been an invaluable pilot in identifying how we might integrate young people into the exhibition programme. It was good to see how our usual method of working with volunteers could be developed and extended to work with young people, especially those who may have been disengaged from learning for some time. Some areas of gallery work are more suitable for work placements with Urban Vision participants, including those with relevance to their lives or future careers and those involving design and media and their own creativity.

The project has reinforced our motivation to involve young people in ‘real’ projects inside and outside of the gallery and a programme will be put in place to build on this. We will continue to run Urban Vision workspace for interested individuals in certain roles alongside our volunteers programme. We will leave open the option of providing work placements in all areas, according to the skills and interests of the individuals who attend Urban Vision.
Once placements have been identified the structure for managing young people’s involvement will be planned so that it is improved for all parties to ensure that young people feel adequately supported and staff feel able to manage the supervision within the framework of their jobs.

6. Appendix

6.1 Work Placement Job Descriptions

Excelerate (Urban Vision Work Space)

Event Management

Job Description

198 Gallery offers the opportunity for 2 young people to help organise the private view of “Three Cornerstones” on Thursday 9 March 2006 (6.30 – 9pm)

The task will include

- promoting for the event: invitation cards distribution and mail-out
- Designing the bar area round the themes of the exhibition
- Deciding and ordering food and rinks
- Helping to identify potential entertainers/ performers and liaise with them
- Helping during the event (evening availability preferred)

Timeline

Promotion: 2\textsuperscript{nd} week of February

Entertainment: 2\textsuperscript{nd} week of February

Space design: 1st proposal required by Thursday 23 February. Final decision on Thursday 26 February

Material preparation/ purchase: Monday 27 Feb – Tuesday 7 March

Décor installation: Tuesday 7 March – Thursday 9 March

Event: Thursday 9 March

Additional Material
“Three Cornerstones” press release and invitation card

Excelerate (Urban Vision Work Space)
Public Relations

Job Description
198 Gallery offers the opportunity for 1 young person to help organise the PR activity for the SecretlaB exhibition (28 April – 2 June 2006)

The task will include
- understanding the key points of the project and write a press release, which will satisfy the journalists’ requirements
- identifying a group of 4/5 youth publications, liaise with them and try to get press coverage
- collecting press coverage and create a press cuttings book

Timeline
Writing the press release: by Tuesday 28 February
Identify youth publications and liaise with them: by Friday 3 March
Trying to get press coverage/ collect cuttings: Friday 3 March – Exhibition starts

Additional material
SecretlaB press release
Excelerate (Urban Vision Work Space)
Evaluation

Job Description

198 Gallery offers the opportunity for 1 young person to help carry out the evaluation activity.

The task will include
- designing a questionnaire
- interviewing attendees at the Three Corner Stones private view
- drawing conclusions from the interviews and the visitors’ books comments

Timeline

Questionnaire: by Friday 24 February
Interviews: Thursday 9 March (evening)
Analysis and report: 14 - 24 April 2006

Excelerate (Urban Vision Work Space)
Exhibition Installation

Job Description

Students will be engaged in the process of installing the exhibition. They will be involved in the decision-making from installation of artworks to whether or not props are needed i.e. plinths and the purchase or designing of them. We will go through the technical aspect of laying out he works of art keeping in mind good health and safety practices and disability access and viewing.
Timeline

28 February – 9 March 2006 (by arrangement with Audley)

Event 9 March 2006

Excelerate (Urban Vision Work Space)

Graphic Designer

Job Description

The 198 Gallery is offering the opportunity for 2 young people to design an invitation card and poster for Doze and Everlyn Nicodemus exhibition.

Client

Eva Langret (Exhibition Manager)

Brief

The card can be any size, but you must think about the budget £200 to print 5000. The poster needs to be A3 and will be printed in-house you need to print about 20, all design work needs to be checked by Kareen Williams (Urban Vision Project Manager).

All publicity must have charity number and relevant logos which will be supplied to you on disc by Eva (Exhibition Manager)

Timeline

Deadline to go to print: 27 March 2006 for Doze

Exhibition Date: 27 April 2006
Deadline to go to print: 15 May 2006 for Everlyn Nicodemus
Exhibition: 15 June 2006

Excelerate (Urban Vision Work Space)
Feature for Live Magazine (Doze)

Job Description
An opportunity for 1 young person to write and design a feature on Doze's exhibition, SecretLaB.

Client
Live Magazine

Timeline
Deadline to go to print: 27 March 2006
Exhibition date: 27 April 2006

Additional material
Doze is a graphic designer whose work reflects the style and aesthetic beliefs and attitude emerging from the cultural clash between graffiti and the language of the streets.

Live Magazine is designed and written by young people for young people aged 12 – 22 in Lambeth.
Excelerate (Urban Vision Work Space)

Documentation

Job Description
The young person will be cataloguing the installed exhibition and the Private View using a digital camera after which pictures files will be downloaded to the computer and filed appropriately. They will also scan the invitation card to be added to the archive.

Timeline
Private View documentation 9 March 2006-10-16
Documentation of exhibition: Monday 13 March 2006

Excelerate (Urban Vision Work Space)

Update Website

Job Description
The young person will be involved in the process of updating the Gallery website with the new and upcoming exhibition information. They will be editing pictures and text to be placed on the already existing 198 Gallery site format and uploading the changes to the Internet.

Timeline
Wednesday 1 March 2006