Spacex Gallery Case Study: X-Panel

1 Summary

A group of 9 young people aged 16-21 were recruited and given a budget to organise their own exhibition/event targeted at other young people. After getting to know each other and the gallery and deciding upon what they wanted to achieve they split into smaller teams with specific roles. The group took full responsibility for all aspects of organising the exhibition and events from selecting artists to marketing. They received training and support from gallery staff.

An exhibition by artist Nicola Curtis ran at Spacex from 22 April to 06 May 2006. The exhibition received an estimated 850 visitors and was featured in the local press. Three events were organised by the group; an exhibition opening event, one for young people involved in Devon Youth Offending Team’s Sibling Project for those at risk of offending, and a music event for young people aged 16-21. An estimated 86 people attended the events.

2 The context

2.1 The organisation

Spacex is located in the Exeter City Centre. It is a registered charity and publicly funded contemporary art gallery. As well as its focus on emerging artists, in recent years the gallery has presented the work of many internationally renowned artists. Spacex has also placed an increasing emphasis upon socially engaged and participatory projects.

Spacex is funded by ACE SW, Exeter City Council and Devon County Council. There are 5 members of staff. X-Panel project partners are Exeter College & Devon Youth Offending Team.

2.2 The situation

The problem was the lack of participation in the gallery by young people, both as audience members and as attendees of events.

2.3 The idea

Aim: To involve young people from a diversity of backgrounds in the development of Spacex

The idea was to invite a group of young people aged 16-21 with an established engagement in art to organise an exhibition/event at Spacex. We wanted to involve the Youth Offending Team’s Sibling Project (a group of young people who’s siblings have been involved in youth crime). The plan
was to invite them to meet the X-Panel and, having consulted with them, for
the X-Panel to organise an event which specifically targeted their needs and
introduced them to the gallery.

3 The project

3.1 Planning

The project facilitators Caroline Mawdsley and Nia Thorpe were involved
with The Education Co-ordinator in planning the project from the outset. Be-
cause we were planning for a project which would be partly defined by the
young people in the group, we had to keep some things flexible.

Young people were recruited through widely distributed publicity as well as
more targeted marketing through project partner, Exeter College.

The Young people were given a very high degree of power to influence the
direction of the project. Their brief was to organise their own exhibition or
event in relation to the exhibition by Ori Gersht which would attract other
young people. They were responsible for all decisions relating to their exhibi-
tion/event including the selection of artists and musicians. This was largely
seen by project participants as a positive thing, but many participants also
reported that the level of responsibility was stressful. See Appendix 2 page 2.

3.2 Delivery

There were 9 fully facilitated whole-day sessions, which took place at week-
ends and throughout an intensive week during the Easter break, and 6 eve-
ning sessions. Extra sessions to those planned had to be scheduled in be-
cause of the group’s ambitious plans.

The first few sessions of the project were quite structured, fitting in a great
deal of learning and planning. The group had a fantasy planning session,
were introduced to the gallery, the people who work there and how it func-
tions, shared lunch, and got to know each other through a series of ice
breakers, and team building exercises. After a series of informative and in-
spiring talks from gallery staff, the group were animated about what they
could achieve and developed many ideas.

Changes to the project: The X-Panel members were reluctant to tailor the
event to the young people in the Sibling Project, partly because they hap-
pened to be slightly younger in age than most of the X-Panel and partly be-
cause they wanted to target what they perceived as ‘their own’ peer group.
Furthermore it was felt by project staff that the young people in the sibling
project may be intimidated by the older X-Panel group. After some discus-
sion with Maxine at the Sibling Project it was agreed that the solution would
be to introduce the young people involved in the Sibling project to the X-
Panel through a peer to peer session involving only two of the X-Panel as
facilitators. A special event was arranged and 6 young people from the Sib-
ling Project aged 13-15 yrs old attended an evening session at Spacex facilitated by two young people from the X-Panel. A take-away meal was arranged and having been introduced to the project and the gallery the young people took part in a sound recording session. Instead of targeting young people from the sibling project for their main event, the X-Panel decided to target young people in the 16-21 age groups who were not gallery visitors. They decided to do this with a music event, which took place on the final day of their exhibition.

**Attendance:** The X-Panel consisted of 12 young people. Three dropped out of the project at an early stage leaving 9. Members were not expected to attend every session once they had split into smaller working teams, but attendance was consistently high. See appendix 1 for a record of attendances. In addition to the X-Panel team, approximately 46 other young people were involved in the project through attending events.

**Activities:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teambuilding sessions</th>
<th>Event Planning sessions</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Consultation sessions</td>
<td>Sound recording sessions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Meeting Curators/gallery staff</td>
<td>Music event for young people</td>
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<td>Research sessions</td>
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<td>Training in marketing</td>
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<td>Family and friends exhibition preview</td>
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**4 Outcomes**

**4.1 Impact on participants**

"Really enjoyable, slightly stressful, but completely beneficial. Priceless experience". (participant)

- 100% of X-Panel participants are interested in continuing their involvement at Spacex.
- 1 X-Panel member has become a regular volunteer at Spacex.
- X-Panel participants invited to run more peer to peer sessions at a Plymouth secondary School.
- Some participants found themselves behind in school/college work due to their project commitments.
• New friendships were formed
• Participants felt more informed about the way a gallery operates
• Participants felt proud of what they had achieved
• Some said that they felt more confident about their ability to work with people and communicate with people they don’t know
• Some participants felt that they had learned more about themselves and what they are good at.
• Participants felt more comfortable & welcome at Spacex at the end of the project than at the beginning.

4.2 Impact on others involved
• A local emerging artist has been given a career boost by being given an exhibition at Spacex
• Severrio Perrino, a 20 yr old student has been trained in evaluation skills and gained valuable work experience (See Appendix 2).
• Project staff learnt more about planning for an unknown outcome.
• One project volunteer has become a volunteer on the Sibling Project.
• A relatively unknown local band (all aged 16 &17) have been given a platform to perform to their peers

4.3 Institutional change
• New link made between Spacex & Exeter Connexions.
• Further projects planned with The Sibling Project.
• Staff at Spacex made more aware of the potential of a youth audience.
• Staff at Spacex interested in running more evening & music events subject to licensing.

5 Lessons learned
5.1 What worked
• Giving young people responsibility for making decisions within a set of quite specific guidelines worked well.
• Giving the group access to the advice of members of staff, including the Director, worked well. It gave the group the signal that they were
being taken seriously not just by project staff but by Spacex as an institution.

- Asking the group to talk about their relationship with the gallery by using the metaphor of a swimming pool worked well and allowed the group to express their feelings about the project and the gallery in more abstract terms and acted as a way of measuring change. See Appendix 2 page 4.

- The music event was an exciting and daring event. Young people attending the event seemed really pleased to see a band playing in an art gallery. ‘It makes you look at the artwork differently’ one attendee commented.

And what didn’t

- Asking the X-Panel to consider the complex needs of a group of young people at risk of social exclusion was asking too much. It did not take into account the motivation, needs of the X-Panel. More time is needed to build up trust between young people from different backgrounds and break down prejudice.

- Allowing the group the freedom to plan too much. Planning an exhibition and three separate events created slightly too much work for project staff and the group themselves.

- The ‘Peer to peer’ introduction to the gallery session had potential to work well but more thought is needed about who constitutes a ‘peer’.

5.2 Next steps

Spacex will continue to run a regular youth panel called X-Panel, which will be open to members, and will research funding sources for future projects with X-Panel.

Spacex are in discussions with The Sibling Project and Connexions to involve young people at risk of social exclusion in a one-off project.

A plan for continuing the involvement of young people and a review of strategy for integrating socially excluded young people will take place.

6 Appendix

6.1 Activity detail table

(Please see separate document files)