



Visual Roots Case Study The Photographers' Gallery

Summary

The Photographers' Gallery offered work placements to two young refugees aged 20 and 21 who were referred by the Connexions Centre in the London borough of Kensington and Chelsea. The volunteers worked towards a Silver Arts Award accreditation and, within this framework, a series of tasks and activities was developed to respond to each young person's needs. Each placement lasted nearly six months .

The context

The organisation

Founded in 1971, The Photographers' Gallery is the UK's foremost venue for photography, offering incomparable exposure to the medium and serving a broad and diverse audience. The Gallery receives upwards of 450,000 visits per year. Through timely exhibitions, engaging projects, talks and resources, the Gallery inspires, informs, and supports its audience's engagement with photography in all its forms.

The Photographers' Gallery's programming consists of an integrated approach across two complementary areas of programme activity: exhibitions and education, the latter consisting of talks and events, workshops, projects and resources. The exhibition programme has a distinguished track record of presenting both contemporary and historical work, showcasing innovative developments in the medium and nurturing new talent.

The situation

The Photographers' Gallery is committed to working with young people. It has been running a work placement programme with secondary school pupils for over three years. It also liaises with teachers and group leaders from a range of educational and community agencies to develop work with vulnerable and disadvantaged young people. Visual Roots has been regarded as an opportunity to broaden this experience, offering a more sustained and in-depth engagement and accreditation for the volunteers as well as an opportunity for the Gallery to learn from the young people on placement.

The idea

The Photographers' Gallery would develop a sustained programme of activities with the participants, aimed at improving their confidence, learning new skills and introducing the volunteers to a range of careers in the cultural sector. The first part of the placement programme would offer a general overview of the Gallery and the work experience opportunities that each department could provide. The young people would spend half a day in:

- Visitor Services, dealing with general enquiries and offering advice to visitors
- Marketing and Public Relations, learning about print, website and market research
- Development, researching prospects, preparing sponsorship and funding proposals and organising events
- Education, including onsite and offsite projects for young people, teachers and families
- Exhibitions, Talks & Events, planning and organising exhibitions, talks and events
- Finance and administration, filing invoices and the accountability of the donation box
- Print Sales, looking at artists' portfolios and thinking about how to present and sell photographic work
- Bookshop with retail activities including ordering, stock control, display and sales
- Operations, including maintenance, planning exhibition displays and framing.

During the second half of the placement (6 days) the two participants would choose one department to focus on and, if appropriate, work on a project within that department. The work placement coordinator and the head of the relevant department would jointly devise a programme of work in consultation with the young person.

The programme would also involve visiting another gallery/museum, where the young people would conduct independent research, and interviewing members of staff. Moreover, there would be opportunities to meet artists and to attend events.

The participating young people would be expected to keep a diary and photography record of their placement. They would do this towards the end of each day, when they would also meet with the Programme Coordinator.

The project

Planning

The Photographers' Gallery initially contacted Refugee Education, who put the gallery in touch with the Connexions Centre in the London borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Connexions suggested two young people who they thought would benefit the most from this opportunity. The overall project was discussed in initial meetings with the two young people and their social workers. The social workers had a key role in planning the project as they knew the young people well and helped the coordinator understand their context and needs.

Delivery

The work experience programme was different for each of the young people, depending on their overall commitment, time availability, level of engagement and other personal issues. The young people:

- Worked with photographer Les Monaghan and fashion photographer Jason Evans
- Visited and reviewed the following exhibitions:
 - Richard Long at Tate Britain
 - Gay Icons at National Portrait Gallery
 - Concrete Poetry at ICA
 - Wildlife Photographer of the Year at Natural History Museum
- Interviewed and photographed members of staff at The Photographers' Gallery
- Supported a number of talks and events, including an INSET session, Book Swap and Teen Talks
- Supported an outreach event at the Royal Geographical Society
- Worked in different areas of the Gallery, including Marketing, Bookshop, Finance and Education
- Planned and delivered a Teen Talk session in response to the exhibition *Jim Goldberg: Open See*, including: research; meeting and interviewing the artist; choosing specific photographs; preparing, practicing and delivering the talk; reflecting on the experience
- Developed their own photographic practice
- Produced portfolios of their work
- Undertook day-to-day administrative tasks.

The social workers received regular e-mails with updates and photographs of the project. They were also consulted when dealing with issues – such as poor attendance or the best way to communicate with young people – and were very supportive throughout the project.

Outcomes

Impact on participants

The self-esteem and confidence of both young people significantly increased through their work placements.

One of the volunteers said that the programme had been the first time she had managed to complete a project. She had been 'surprised' at her abilities and skills and felt more confident now. She also said that the placement was very useful '*because I got to see what I am capable of doing*'. Moreover, she has enjoyed being at the Gallery where she has access to the internet and can talk about both work and life issues with members of staff.

The other young person learned a lot about photography and particularly enjoyed meeting and working with photographers. He has found it useful and inspirational to look at other artists' work as well as 'being honoured' to meet them personally. He has also enjoyed photographing and supporting staff at Gallery events.

Both young people substantially benefited from planning, preparing and delivering their Teen Talk. They shared thoughtful and critical responses to their favorite photographs from the *Jim Goldberg: Open See* exhibition. They structured their talk and practiced with friends and colleagues at the Gallery in order to best communicate their ideas to the audience. They both said they now felt more confident about speaking in front of a group of people and felt proud and satisfied of having achieved this challenge.

Accreditation

Both volunteers worked towards a Silver Arts Award.

Institutional impact

Prior to this project the Gallery had provided one to two-week placements primarily for Year 10 and 11 pupils, offering a general overview of the work areas at the Gallery. In contrast, the Visual Roots placements were tailored to the two young people's specific needs and abilities, as well as the Arts Award requirements. This meant more one-to-one work as well as devising specific tasks and organizing visits to other museums and galleries. The placements covered a period of nearly six months and required a relatively long and thorough commitment from both the young people and Gallery staff.

Evaluation process

The coordinator and young people held regular one-to-one meetings to reflect on progress, plan future activities and discuss any issues arising.

The project coordinator kept a general attendance record, including observation notes about the young people's accomplishment, and monitored their work according to the Arts Award structure.

The young people recorded the process in a work portfolio that includes evidence of their activities and tasks, photographs and personal reflections on their work.

Lessons Learned

Overall, it was a positive experience for the Gallery. However, the project lasted longer than initially planned and required more time and support from the coordinator than initially envisaged, which impacted on the progress of other Gallery projects. The fact that the young people did not attend consistently made it very difficult to plan a work schedule and develop tasks in advance, especially when involving other staff or support for a specific event. The Gallery team learned that working with vulnerable young people requires a lot of flexibility, short-term planning of tasks, two to three staff to oversee the young people, constant and good communication with the volunteers as well as working closely with the young people's social workers to receive support.

Next Steps

Both young people will be invited to participate in the Gallery's Youth Forum and will continue to receive updates on exhibitions and events. They will be invited to attend talks and events for free and will be encouraged to volunteer in activities of their interest. However, each of them has their own personal commitments as well as other interests, and it will be up to the young people to suggest the frequency of their visits and overall level of involvement at the Gallery.

Due to limited staff capacity the Gallery is not able to continue offering full Arts Award programmes. However, the Gallery would like to contribute to Arts Award programmes run by other galleries, museums or schools, and offer their programmes, in particular the opportunity for young people to take part in its Teen Talks programme, to complete specific Arts Award units.