STUDIO 393 – WHERE CREATIVITY IS THE PRODUCT

Art Programming for Youth

At Studio 393 in Portage Place mall, Winnipeg, you’ll find youth of all ages dancing, music playing, and art crowding the walls. This is not your usual mall hangout.

Studio 393 grew out of Graffiti Art Programming (GAP) Inc, a long-running Winnipeg-based urban art collective that offers art programming for youth. The studio – which targets youth 13 to 29 years of age – provides access to various art forms, such as print making, painting and drawing, as well as hip-hop and break dance classes.

Established in May 2012, the studio is gaining a foothold among youth as a place to create, learn and share. At Studio 393, youth develop new skills, nurture self-confidence and build a sense of community. With exposure to various art forms there is a constant transfer of knowledge between staff, volunteers, instructors, and youth. Through this, says Site Manager Ben Jones, “we build competencies of all kinds – physical, artistic, expressive and mental.”

“As soon as you step inside, people engage with you at a personal or artistic level,” says Jones. The drop-in, no-fee structure of the Studio supports this participation, as do Studio 393’s partnerships with Winnipeg Foundation, Downtown Winnipeg Biz and the City of Winnipeg.

SOME CHALLENGES

Setting up Studio 393 downtown meant overcoming a negative perception of downtown Winnipeg. Opening the studio in a central location that is easily accessed by youth from all areas meant meeting the concerns of parents and guardians head on. In response, the staff welcomes visitors to the studio to ensure there is a good understanding of the space, the programming and the staff.

Being downtown brings ample foot traffic in front of the studio. This increases awareness that art programming is available, and generates interest among youth.

At the same time, Studio 393 staff learned that some youth felt unwelcome in the area, and were hesitant to enter spaces they felt were “off-limits”. By opening their doors downtown and creating a space that is designed specifically for youth, Studio 393 creates opportunities for youth to engage in different community spaces and offers a safe setting for young people to enter and explore.

Thank you to Ben Jones and Bob Veruela for sharing experiences and lessons learned.

For more information, check out http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VHeijaJ73w4 or visit https://www.facebook.com/Studio393

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Another obstacle to overcome was negative impressions about youth. As Graffiti Gallery Director Bob Veruela says, re-introducing youth into public space directly confronts the stereotype that all youth are troublemakers.

During a 2011 pilot, children, youth and young adults of all ages were visiting the studio. It was difficult to deliver programming to all ages. Although it was a hard choice to restrict the clientele to the 13-29 year age group, it was important to define the target audience for the art programming. This ensures that Studio 393 programs make sense for the ages, interests and abilities of their clients.

**LESSONS LEARNED**

**Evaluate your progress to define your purpose, goals and audience.** Studio 393 opened in April 2011 as a pilot project for eight months. During this time staff assessed who visited the site, what programs were popular and how programming fit the needs of youth. This information was then used to further tailor the programming, define the target age group, and confirm how Studio 393’s concept could work in the proposed space.

**Identify and build on existing networks.** An urban artist himself, Veruela says hip-hop dance in Winnipeg grew over years from a network of shared knowledge. This network of urban artists and dancers was a foundation for Studio 393. Today former Graffiti Gallery students teach classes at the Studio, and urban artists provide important mentoring. The network of artists and dancers across the region have made Studio 393 programs a success, while building a foundation to nurture future leaders, teachers and artists.

**A flexible physical space can support participation.**

The studio is an open space, which allows different programming to take place simultaneously, and for supplies and project stations to be moved around. As a result, a variety of activities can take place any evening, multiplying opportunities for participation.

**TIPS FOR SUCCESS**

- Your space is important; make it inviting and welcoming, and adapt it to your audience.
- Design activities that are accessible and user-friendly.
- Create activities that show results early and often.
- A drop-in format works well, but consider pre-registration when launching new programs. This can help to gauge interest and ensure participation.
- Assess your program; use what you learn to shift things around and meet the needs of your audience.
- Reach out to your community and networks. Never stop communicating about your successes.

**Public space and location can impact behaviour.** Veruela and his team have discovered that the centrally located space of Studio 393 has a positive influence on participation and behaviour. The “store front” layout is inviting, and often draws in youth who are walking by. At the same time, being in a publicly visible space has an impact on behaviour; just as libraries have certain rules of etiquette, says Veruela, being in the public mall space has a positive influence on youth interactions.

**Remove obstacles to engagement.** Studio 393’s partnerships have ensured that participation in all programming is free. The no registration, drop-in format invites youth to take part – without the worry that they have missed a class, or might have fallen behind. This no-cost, drop-in approach removes obstacles to engagement.

As Jones puts it, “you want to have the least barriers to a product; and the product here is creativity.”