

Project title and short summation

VOICES (Visual Outreach Initiative Creating Empowered Students)

On many levels, students today may face difficult challenges. At the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, we have developed a specialized program that helps lead students back to their peers and studies. Art becomes the conduit and our participants become mentors in their classrooms. The results have been extremely successful. In collaboration with the York Region District School Board and sponsored by the McMichael Volunteer Committee, the VOICES program welcomes thirty grade five students from York Region area schools for five consecutive weeks at the gallery and culminates with an outreach program at the respective schools.

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Profile of Museum

The McMichael Canadian Art Collection is unique in being the only major gallery in the country with the mandate to collect Canadian art exclusively. The collection offers visitors the opportunity to view a large permanent display of works by Tom Thomson, the Group of Seven and their contemporaries. The McMichael has an impressive collection of contemporary First Nations art as well as prints, drawings and sculptures by Inuit artists. Educational programs for schools attract 30,000 students annually from more than 40 school boards and private schools. Students range from kindergarten to high school and the numbers of adult student groups is rising as well.

Project Rationale/Audience Target/Learning Goals

Our VOICES program involves selected students in Grade 5 from the York Region District School Board. These students have been specifically chosen by their teachers as ones who they feel will benefit from a specialized art program. It has been emphasized to those in the selection process that a particular talent/interest in art is not a criterion for participation in the program. The schools themselves may be in an area that has been identified as one whose demographics deal with financial and/or social challenges. Some of the students' behaviour has been noted as reticent, reclusive, withdrawn or disengaged.

The VOICES project was developed as an art centered mentoring program. Research suggests that children disengage from positive and productive communities for a number of reasons. While social economic status may be a contributing factor for at risk children, academic pressures, student ability, personal resiliency and social pressures

must be taken into account. Although students may disengage from positive and productive communities for different reasons it has been identified that most of these children have the ability to respond well to appropriate mentorship.

The McMichael Canadian Art Collection Education Department in partnership with the York Region District School Board developed VOICES to bring together students from different schools in the region for a full day of gallery experience for five weeks. The final week of the program is the outreach session in the individual student's school.

The Learning objectives:

- The students will develop consistent and positive relationships with other students and gallery staff.
- The students will acquire knowledge and new skills by special access to collections, artists and the creative process.
- The students will learn to appreciate their environment by observation of the art and by creating their own art in the studio and "en plein air".
- Students will be able to make connections with their experiences at the gallery and the classroom curriculum.
- Students will develop a sense of self-worth by respectful discussion, by making presentations and by giving and receiving constructive criticism and making journal entries.
- All students return to their classroom with a personal portfolio of 5 different art works.
- The final day of the program involves outreach to the students' schools to present a workshop to their peers. They will learn how to make a presentation and how to use the resources provided. The VOICES participants become mentors to their classmates.

The anticipated outcome of the program

That the program will empower students to take on a mentorship roll at school with peers and/or it will support participating students by investing new knowledge and skills that will allow students to move towards positive engagement with school and the school community.

Evaluation

This program was first offered in January 2008. 45 students attended the program one day each week for six weeks. The program was repeated in 2009 and in 2010 there were 4 groups involving 120 students. There is a commitment for 3 groups of 30 students in January and February 2011. After the initial pilot program in 2008 gallery staff met with the Board researcher for debriefing and evaluation. There was a follow-up with students' teachers and parents. The same process of evaluation has been used before and after all subsequent programs. A longitudinal study to evaluate the program is planned for 2011.

The evaluations and focus groups have shown that the program has been a great success for the participating students. The most repeated comment and noticeable change has

been the increased level of self confidence the students have displayed. By using journaling, mentoring models, communication and critical analysis opportunities plus the exposure to many types of art expression, the students have become engaged in their classroom environments.

The following documents have been prepared by Scott Milne, Researcher, YRDSB: Focus Group Summary 2008/2009, (prepared 2010), Focus Group Protocol and Teacher Assessment

Recommendations for others

We found that the model of mentorship was vital to the programs' success. It was important for the students to have a lot of guidance and encouragement to try new skills when undertaking the projects. This was supplied from a number a sources, not only their teachers but peers and gallery staff.

Projected dates

Pilot project- January 2008

MCAC and YRDSB have offered the program every year including 2011.

Resources

Breakdown of collaboration

YRDSB:

- supplied consultants from Performance Plus schools project
- transportation for students to the gallery
- supplied teachers' replacements in the classrooms on days when they came to the gallery- 1 teacher per school accompanied the students to the gallery
- were invoiced for the art materials that were left in the classrooms on the outreach day of the program
- hosted orientation sessions for all involved staff

MCAC:

- supplied staff to design, set-up tours and workshops, supply materials and deliver programs- 2 paid Educators, 1-2 Docents and 1-2 members of the Volunteer committee for 6 week duration of program
- each session involved 30 students. Venue at the gallery was provided for 1 day/week for 5 weeks while at the gallery, 10:00- 2:00, 6th week school outreach
- input for orientation with school board

Technological resources were minimal. Depending on the activities for the day, a microphone, projector and laptop were used.

Physical requirements made use of the existing facilities at the gallery. One room was set aside and configured for studio participation. Tours to gallery spaces varied from week to week, including outdoor sketching opportunities. Instructions and sample boards were placed on display easels. Students work was displayed on presentation boards.