CULTURAL PROGRAMMING REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Cultural Programming, spring 2015

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The words "culture" and "programming" are both vague. They bear the weight of many complex meanings that can be interpreted differently depending on the interpreter. Cultural programming is just as broad and not easily defined. In a few short weeks I developed knowledge of what makes up cultural programming, the politics surrounding arts and culture programs, and strategies for developing and implementing programs. While building my knowledge of cultural programming, I crafted a proposal and began laying the groundwork for an arts and culture council in my hometown of Denton, Montana.

I created the project independently which was both a challenge but also practical in this situation. After growing up in the Denton area, I had amassed intimate knowledge of the place, people and culture that would have been difficult to communicate to others. This awareness, coupled with existing relationships within the community, gave me the ability to jump into an ambitious project independently. On the other hand, I found myself limited creatively to my own instincts and skills. I longed for the inspiration and support of others who could help me build the program collectively, making it more robust and responsive than I could alone. To alleviate this conceptual isolation, I occasionally consulted with my peers, relying on their outside perspectives to inform my project. I was definitely concerned that my own perspective and personal experience might affect how I developed the program, causing me to be blind to certain challenges or considerations. I am sure I had to do more work that if I had been in a group, but I also had the opportunity to experience more of the planning work first hand.

Wanting to develop a program that could actually be implemented, my mind went instantly to a mural that I had created while in high school in my hometown that today is worn and no longer relevant. The need for change had already been identified. All I needed was to develop a solution to revitalize it. I began planning out the process for creating a public art

project initiated by the community but discovered a larger program concept underneath this one project idea. I realized that the need was larger than just one creative project and that the community would greatly benefit from continued cultural development. While now it seems obvious to me to hone into community needs and assets, this was something new that I was grappling with not long ago. Coming into the Arts and Administration program, I struggled with the idea of how and why to develop certain creative projects, but I now realize that it simply starts with place and the cultural identity embedded there. I also thought that programming had to be entirely unique, but I remember the leaders from the University of Oregon Cultural Forum reminding us not to reinvent the wheel. That uniqueness comes from the specificity of place. Therefore, the skill that I stood to gain the most was the ability to observe place, analyze that environment, and then be able to make recommendations for possible creative projects or solutions. It brought me so much clarity to realize that the answer to content and project development was already embedded in the community. The cultural nuggets were just waiting to be mined and then transformed.

The project was a necessary challenge for me because I often find that I easily can come up with ideas, but have difficulty actually putting them into practice to the effect that I have in my mind. The easiest part was developing a vision, as it is not hard for me to get excited about an idea. I grappled the most with determining how to actually implement everything in order to get to my specific outcomes. The process of critically thinking about my program idea and developing a mission, goals and specific objectives helped give me clarity of purpose. It also better prepared me to communicate it to others, which I learned was absolutely essential in such a community oriented project. I needed to be able to concisely and persuasively talk about the program idea to a diverse range of people. Having strong goals and objectives, and

understanding specific outcomes was vital throughout the entire process because I knew that every element of the program had to relate back to the mission and goals. Having to actually go through this process confirmed the importance of setting realistic goals. Even now I feel that the goals and outcomes need to be even further developed in my plan.

I also found that because I already had existing knowledge of the community that I didn't rely as much on outside research, but I realize that my understanding should be backed up more by specific resources. Completing the project, as well as having to do planning projects in other courses, has helped me learn the importance of careful analysis of the community which the program will affect. Understanding the context of the environment is crucial to ensuring that the program is truly responsive, necessary and will be well received by its audience. I also learned the importance of identifying community assets and community needs. Realizing that understanding the community was the foundation of the program idea, I decided to include community assessment as a major part of my program plan, providing the stimulus for creative projects to be developed that originate directly from real perspectives. This forced me to think more about community interaction, combining this process with what I have learned about community cultural development and participation. I had to really think about what this interaction would look like within the community, the methods that would be used to collect perspectives from locals, how this idea would be introduced to them, and how the information would be used to inform creative projects. The idea of universal design and accessibility came into play here. I worked to develop a multitude of ways in which individuals could contribute their thoughts and feedback, providing opportunities for different ages and learning styles to participate.

This part of the project became even more instrumental during the few days that I recently spent in Denton talking with stakeholders. It was then that I realized I was actually dealing with real people. I realized that there could be great discrepancy between my ideas and what I thought would happen, the reality of the people and place. I also realized how important it will be to get real practical experience with programming in order to understand how program plans translate to real practice. I began to worry as soon as I thought about actually trying to implement the process, because I could plan all I want, but I could not predetermine responses from real people. This related so much to the conversations with the Cultural Forum and Isaac Marquez who had both emphasized risk management, as well as preparing for challenges and negative responses. I realized that you cannot please everyone, and that there will always be those who may not agree, but it is important to prepare responses to difficult questions that may arise as well as make sure to include those who may have think differently. More problems will come with excluding dissent than welcoming it into the conversation.

Another aspect of program development that I learned was developing stakeholder relationships and community buy-in. This was something that seemed to come up in all of our discussions and readings in one way or another, so it became a big focus of my program plan. As we have touched on a lot in class, it is important to foster an ethic of cooperation, inclusion, openness and to look to others for expertise. I quickly realized how much I would depend on others for advice and background information in the community. Through actively thinking about potential stakeholders and those in in the community who might have an vested interest in such a program, I really learned just how flexible the term stakeholder or participant can be. I ended up including not just civic and organizational leaders but also those who hold a wealth of historical and cultural knowledge. Once I had an idea of stakeholders, I had to consider how I

would engage with these individuals. I found this to be surprisingly difficult because it was something that I had never given much thought.

I also had to rethink who might actually be considered an artist because there are not any "artists" in the traditional sense living in Denton. This expanded to include crafters, farmers who might be building things in their barns, avid gardeners, quilters, and even the guy at the outskirts of town who re-arranges his stone wall. Broadening this idea of the artist equally broadened the scope of possible creative projects that came to mind. My definition of community also expanded because I had to consider those who are part of the Denton network but are not necessarily living there. We have talked a lot about terminology and interpretation and I now better understand the flexibility that a programmer has to have in order to adapt to a specific community or specific circumstance.

I relied heavily on the book "Arts and Cultural Programming: A Leisure Perspective" (Carpenter and Blandy, 2008) to guide my way throughout the process, particularly the approaches to programming and the chapter on programming tasks and functions (Carpenter, 2008). It was helpful to see the breakdown of program development, especially because a community wide program can feel daunting to begin planning. It was important for me to break everything down into manageable steps.

I also went back to discussions about the politics of public space and how treatment of those spaces can really affect the community. So much of the impetus for this program was tied to revitalization of public space and making the downtown area a place where people actually want to be. There is an opportunity to transform these spaces into places utilized for bringing people together, celebrating culture and enriching identity, as well as making space for art. But with any public project there are always politics involved. I was especially concerned with

perceptions from the community, knowing that there may likely be resistance to change. Because public works are open for anyone to experience, there is risk that not all will be pleased, which makes it even more important to ensure as many people are at the table as possible when going through the planning process. There is also the issue of public versus private. Many of the buildings in need of revitalization are on Main Street in Denton. They are older commercial buildings that are directly in the downtown public sphere yet are privately owned and used for storage, not open or accessible to the public. This requires good relationships with these owners in order to go about any project planning which may utilize these spaces. A potential problem with planning public works within or on the outside of private buildings or spaces is that the private owner may feel the need to influence the direction of the project which shifts power from the participants to the individual who owns the space. I realize that this will have to be a consideration in choosing spaces for public artworks in Denton as there are many others in the community who have intentions for these same spaces.

The experience was really vital to my career goals because I envision myself in a programming role in the future. Having to find a balance between the passion and ideas within the arts and the practicality of actually making it happen was definitely informative and challenging. It also was related to community cultural development which is something that I have been thinking a lot about. The program became more than just developing an arts project but rather helping to build on the culture of the community. The fact that the location was a small town fits in well with my research and interests. I can see this as a project that I might like to work hard to actually implement.

Resources

Carpenter, G. (2008). Chapter Three: Programming Tasks and Functions. *Arts and Cultural Programming: A Leisure Perspective.* Human Kinetics: Champaign, IL. pp. 37-49.