



The Art Engagement Project

Empowering the Downtown Eastside Community Through Creativity

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Acknowledgements

As we reflect on the Art Engagement Project, it is essential to acknowledge that our work took place on the unceded ancestral territories of the xwməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), Stó:lō, and Səlílwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tseil-Waututh) Nations. We recognize that our presence here is not only an opportunity but also a responsibility. We are encouraged to extend this acknowledgement beyond mere words, striving to make it a genuine and meaningful tribute. We understand that the land on which we gather has a profound impact on the communities we serve, and we are committed to approaching our work with respect, gratitude, and a deep appreciation for the richness of this land's history and culture.

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Executive Summary

In the heart of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES), a community grappling with significant social and health challenges, the Art Engagement Project emerged. This report offers a concise overview of our mission, activities, impacts, and future recommendations.

The Art Engagement Project encompassed 18 creative arts and crafts workshops over six months, conducted at various DTES locations. The impact was profound, fostering joy and a stronger sense of community among attendees. UBC volunteers played a vital role, connecting with and learning from this traditionally underserved group.

Significant strengths emerged during the project. Valuable insights were gained into project management, community engagement, and the therapeutic potential of art in mental health support. Challenges, including ensuring workshop accessibility and managing volunteers effectively, were met with adaptability and resolve. Within the DTES community, resilience and solidarity among women highlighted the importance of creating inclusive spaces for healing and artistic expression. The project also led to the establishment of the Downtown Eastside Arts and Crafts Society, empowered by the connections formed and lessons learned.

High participation and engagement rates were achieved, with certain workshops drawing substantial interest. End-of-project surveys yielded overwhelmingly positive feedback, with 100% of respondents highlighting the tangible benefits of the workshops. Additionally, a lasting connection was forged between Vancouver Coastal Health and UBC, benefiting both volunteers and community clinics.

Original learning objectives were met and surpassed, including creating an inclusive workshop schedule, enhancing leadership and organizational skills, and gaining a deeper understanding of barriers faced by women in the DTES. These insights will inform future endeavours, focusing on inclusivity and advocacy for marginalized communities.

Introduction and Background

In the heart of Vancouver's DTES, a community grappling with a myriad of social and health challenges, a stark disparity looms. According to the Community Health Service Area Health Profile, residents of the DTES face significantly higher rates of mental health issues than the average British Columbia resident. The statistics are sobering: individuals living in this community are 32.3% more likely to grapple with depression, 30.8% more prone to mood and anxiety disorders, and seven times more susceptible to schizophrenia and other delusional disorders.¹ These numbers are not just data; they represent the everyday struggles and resilience of a community that urgently needs support.

It is within this context that the Art Engagement Project emerged. This project had the goal to harness the transformative power of artistic engagement as a means to alleviate the burden of mental health challenges that weigh heavily on the DTES residents. Our mission was driven by both a commitment to the therapeutic potential of art and a dedication to addressing the immediate mental health needs of this community.

In the following sections of this report, we will delve into the intricacies of the Art Engagement Project, exploring its objectives and outcomes. However, before embarking on this journey, it is crucial to understand the rationale behind our project's focus and target population.

Informed by recent global events, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic, our project narrows its focus to self-identified women who attend evening clinics, also known as 'Womxn's Nights,' at community health centers in the DTES. The pandemic has unmasked the disproportionate impact it has had on women, with a surge in intimate partner violence, a harrowing precursor to women's homelessness.² These stark realities emphasize the immediate and pressing need to enhance the well-being of women in the DTES.

Project Overview

Summary:

The Art Engagement Project encompassed 18 creative arts and crafts workshops over a six-month period, conducted at Vancouver Coastal Health's Womxn's Nights, at the Pender Community Health Center, the Heatley Clinic, and the Downtown Community Health Center. These workshops covered a range of activities such as terrarium making, candle making, UV resin jewelry crafting, tie-dye, painting, and pin making. The impact of these workshops on the women attending Womxn's Nights was profound, fostering joy and a stronger sense of community. The project also involved UBC volunteers, creating a unique opportunity for them to connect with and learn from a traditionally underserved group in our society. The Connect to Community Grant exclusively supported the purchase of workshop supplies.

Reflections:

During the implementation of this project, several significant strengths, assets, and capacities emerged. On a personal level, we gained valuable insights into project management, community engagement, and the transformative potential of art in mental health support. We learned to adapt and overcome challenges, such as ensuring workshop accessibility and managing volunteer resources effectively.

Within the community, we witnessed a strong sense of resilience and solidarity among the women in the DTES. Their enthusiasm and active participation in the workshops reaffirmed the importance of creating inclusive spaces where individuals can heal and connect through artistic expression.

Moreover, the project led to the formation of the Downtown Eastside Arts and Crafts Society, a non-profit organization dedicated to empowering women in the DTES and underserved populations through arts and crafts. The development of this society was made possible by the experiences and connections gained through the Connect to Community grant, providing us with a deeper understanding of community needs and the path forward for improvement.

Community Impact:

In evaluating our project's impact, we examined both participation rates and workshop engagement. Notably, certain workshops, such as UV resin jewelry making, garnered

exceptional interest, drawing in over 90% of Womxn's Nights attendees, while painting workshops attracted around 60%. Generally, our workshops enjoyed robust participation, averaging at approximately 80%. These sessions were thoughtfully designed to be accessible to all, bolstered by ample volunteer support, ensuring that everyone received the assistance they required. Consequently, the level of engagement in each activity remained consistently high.

Beyond tracking participation and engagement levels, we conducted end-of-project surveys, receiving overwhelmingly positive feedback (see Appendix A). Remarkably, 100% of respondents noted the tangible benefits of our workshops and expressed a desire for more creative opportunities in their community.

Furthermore, our project forged a lasting connection between Vancouver Coastal Health and UBC. We welcomed several UBC volunteers who gained invaluable knowledge from their involvement, which in turn, informed and benefited the community clinics. Our workshops sparked ideas for low-budget activities that can continue in our absence. Most notably, this project served as the catalyst for the creation of the Downtown Eastside Arts and Crafts Society, an organization committed to delivering workshops to underserved populations, ensuring our impact endures. Through this experience, we have gained valuable insights into the path forward and opportunities for refinement.

Student Learning

Original Learning Objectives:

1. **Create an Inclusive Workshop Schedule:** The goal was to construct a comprehensive workshop schedule that considers the varying abilities of the women in the DTES community. This approach aimed to foster an inclusive environment for creative expression.
2. **Enhance Leadership Skills:** To further develop leadership skills, monthly check-ins with volunteers were initiated. These check-ins were intended to facilitate communication of experiential learning, assess attendee feedback, and make adjustments as needed to meet project goals.
3. **Identify Barriers and Advocate for Change:** A broader objective was to recognize the challenges faced by underserved women in the DTES and identify gaps in the social systems they engage with. This was aimed at raising awareness and advocating for change.

Achievements:

Each of these learning objectives was not only met but exceeded during the course of the project.

- **Inclusive Workshop Schedule:** We successfully crafted a workshop schedule that accommodated the diverse needs and abilities of the participants. In cases where activities were more complex, we proactively ensured there were sufficient volunteers to provide support. One valuable lesson was learned through our candle-making workshop, which, while creative and enjoyable, raised safety concerns in certain housing facilities. We realized the importance of considering such factors to ensure inclusivity in future workshops.
- **Leadership and Organizational Skills:** Our leadership and organizational skills were significantly enhanced through regular check-ins with volunteers and workshop coordinators. These discussions enabled us to identify effective strategies and make necessary adjustments. A key challenge we addressed was improving communication between volunteers and participants, particularly in the context of a trauma-informed approach. We learned to be sensitive to the histories of discrimination and mistreatment many participants had faced and emphasized creating an inviting atmosphere for them to actively engage in discussions.
- **Understanding Barriers:** Through this project, we developed a profound understanding of the barriers that women in the DTES encounter. This experience was not only personally enriching but also contributed significantly to our professional growth.

Leveraging the Learning:

The insights gained from this project will have a lasting impact on our future endeavors. As we continue our journey, we will apply these lessons to create more inclusive and accessible programs and advocate for marginalized communities. The value of this experience in both our professional and community involvement cannot be overstated. It has laid a strong foundation for our commitment to effecting positive change in underserved populations.

Recommendations [Next Steps]

One significant request from a participant underscores the importance of increasing our commitment to Indigenous-centered creative workshops. As articulated in our land acknowledgment at the outset of this report, operating on this land is both a privilege and a responsibility, and we remain steadfast in our dedication to honoring the rich history of this land and its Indigenous peoples. While we made efforts to incorporate elements of Indigenous culture into our workshops, such as featuring Indigenous art printouts in our pin-making workshop, we are committed to doing more. In the future, we aspire to host Indigenous cultural and creative workshops. To achieve this, we will actively seek Indigenous community members to lead these workshops, ensuring they are compensated for their valuable time and expertise. This initiative will not only enhance the lives of workshop participants but also contribute to the preservation and propagation of Indigenous arts and culture.

In addition to fostering Indigenous-centered workshops, we aim to open our platform to other talented members of the DTES community. Enterprising Women Making Art, an organization dedicated to providing a safe space for local artistic creators, is home to individuals who craft and sell their artistic creations in this vibrant community. Our aspiration is to invite some of these exceptionally skilled women to lead our workshops, and, in appreciation of their expertise, we will provide fair compensation. This collaborative endeavor will allow the broader community to benefit from the creative talents of these remarkable individuals while supporting their artistic endeavors.

As we embark on this new chapter with the Downtown Eastside Arts and Crafts Society, we are committed to acting on these ideas and expanding the reach of our workshops to a broader audience. Through these endeavors, we aspire to foster positive change and continue our mission of empowerment and unity in the DTES community.

References

1. 3221 Downtown Eastside - BC Community Health Data [Internet]. [cited 2023 Oct 4].
Available from: <http://communityhealth.phsa.ca/CHSAHealthProfiles>
2. The impact of covid-19 on women. UN Executive Office of the Secretary-General (EOSG)
Policy Briefs and Papers. 2020; doi:10.18356/2de8d75a-en

Appendix A

Participant Statements Collected From Project Surveys

“Thank you for making a very difficult time in my life a bit more grounded and less threatening”

“It is rare for some of us to do much art, so it was fun and exciting to participate and visit with other women, and take home something beautiful, as well as free”

“Art is used in healing. I really love it. I have nowhere to paint so this is why I love it so much”

“The workshops are totally awesome”

“Everyone enjoys the crafts and company”

“The workshops always create emotional well being - and that goes out into the wider community”

“These workshops very definitely have a positive impact - very important for community cohesion and mental health”