

Research in Cinema: Building Sustainable Art-Based Outreach Collaborations to Engage Local Communities.

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Sometimes the most effective partnerships start with a good idea that turns into something more engaging, and fun, than originally imagined. That is what we believe happened with the program Extra Credit, a partnership in Columbia, MO between Ragtag Cinema and The Connector, an office at the University of Missouri. After several months of meetings through which a team from The Connector and Ragtag Cinema discussed possible approaches for a partnership, we decided to pursue a film event that would feature University of Missouri researchers. The goal was to create an opportunity for audience members from the community to learn more about the content and history of various films. In order to facilitate this, we wanted to bring in expert researchers from the university for a panel and Q&A after each showing. Researchers were chosen because their work or creative activities related to salient themes within the movies. Our first event was in September 2018, with the first showing: *Black Panther* and has continued as a successful monthly series ever since.

We organized a showing of the Marvel's *Black Panther* partly because it was popular film, but it also provided meaningful points of discussion that related to the work of researchers and creative artists at the university. Our first panel featured an engineer, an architect, and a costume designer who discussed energetic materials, virtual reality, and the afro-futuristic design of the film, respectively. We learned early on that for this partnership to be successful and sustainable, both parties would have to have their needs met: Ragtag Cinema's mission must be upheld in the choice of movies, and The Connector would be charged with contacting appropriate experts from the university. *Black Panther* was also a significant example of how outreach can include a wide variety of disciplines and benefit from the dynamic combination.

A unique feature of the Extra Credit program is that it is housed in an entertainment setting. In contrast to attending formal research discussions or speeches traditionally taking place in academic settings, the audience members for Extra Credit are invited to watch a film in a small local theater without any obligation to remain for the discussion afterwards. Though we do encourage the audience to stay for the panel after the films, it is not a requirement when seeing the movie. Despite this freedom, Extra Credit has consistently been able to garner an active and curious audience for each event's discussion and Q&A. Evidence suggests that people often make use of informal learning resources such as books, television, and life experiences to an equal or greater degree than formal educational resources (Falk, 2007). The "free-choice" nature of Extra Credit provides the audience with an informal educational experience that is tailored to their specific interests and helps sustain the lifelong nature of learning. Additionally, Extra Credit discussions typically take on an intimate and relaxed nature which allows audience members to feel more comfortable participating. Having just watched the film together, the researchers and audience members are connected through a shared experience and are provided with a common ground of understanding on which to center the conversation. The movies provide material to bridge the panelists' areas of expertise with the audience curiosities and interests.

While Extra Credit has many benefits for audience members, it also benefits the participants by providing an opportunity for faculty to participate in public engagement and a chance to talk about research at a local venue to a local audience. The program is designed for

both researchers who are experienced and less experienced with outreach public engagement initiatives to have success. We refer to Extra Credit as our “light lift” event for researchers, as the event is already coordinated and planned by our team, so panelists only need to attend in order to be a part of the event. Extra Credit is also a relatively simple and accessible way for campus researchers to get involved with outreach and engagement, as the event format does not require the panel to prepare formal presentations of their research. Rather, the informal nature of the event allows for the panelists to talk through their research and the film in lay terms. Each panel is facilitated by a member of The Connector staff in a way that promotes discussion between the panelists and audience members. Thus, Extra Credit is a way to bridge the gap between researchers and the public in a fun and engaging way.

From our evaluation efforts, we have found that most participants in Extra Credit found out about the program from being members of Ragtag Cinema or Ragtag’s advertising efforts, rather than our own. This was an interesting piece of information which made us realize that we were connecting with an audience in the local community that would otherwise not have been associated with the university. Through collaboration with this local theater, we are able to provide a voluntary informal outreach experience to a new population and strengthen the relationship between the University of Missouri and the community. We believe it is important to reach out to a variety of communities to provide a space where everyone can get engaged with the research at Mizzou.

Despite the overall success and positive feedback regarding the Extra Credit program, this unique partnership does come with its own set of unique challenges. The first difficulty surrounds the coordination of the program itself. From deciding which films to show each month, recruiting panelists based on that film, and facilitating a meaningful discussion in 30-45 minutes. Additionally, it has been well established that there are a myriad of difficulties surrounding the evaluation of informal outreach programs (Allen et. al, 2008). Our Extra Credit program provides an outreach experience for a wide variety of researchers, with a wide variety of participants, surrounding a wide variety of films. Despite having clear goals for the desired impact of our program, the dynamic nature of each event makes a rigorous evaluation quite daunting. We hope to develop easy evaluation tools that do not interfere with the relaxed nature of the event, but will allow us to continue to improve the program as we move ahead.

The future of Extra Credit is bright. Our partnership with Ragtag Cinema has proven to be a fruitful venture that benefits both parties involved and works to support the mission of The Connector. Right now, the program is scheduled to continue indefinitely. We are delighted to be able to coordinate Extra Credit and hope this proves to be a sustainable feature of The Connector’s programming move forward. Our experience should serve as inspiration for other universities to get involved with a variety of members in the community and to explore art-based partnerships.

References

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