

UCL student volunteering case study

Sam – studying BA English Literature

Hosted virtual poetry sessions for Age UK

Please provide a little further information on your background; what are you currently studying and when did you do your internship/work experience?

I am currently a third year BA English Literature student and I volunteered with Age UK Kensington and Chelsea over the course of the summer of 2020.

Why did you choose to work for this company?

The combination of the COVID-19 lockdown, my having nothing to do over summer, and the advertisement of the volunteering position on the Student's Union website all sort of directed me towards the placement. Age UK Kensington and Chelsea are also my local branch of Age UK and so I wanted to help out the best I could, in any way that I could – volunteering for them seemed the best way for me to be able to do that.

How did you get the job with the company? Is there anything that you would recommend to any students should they wish to get into this Sector?

I applied for the position via the Student's Union volunteering webpage – I would recommend that students at UCL who want to volunteer consult this facility as it has some excellent opportunities available. In terms of the specific process of getting the position, I had to fill out a survey of a similar format to this, detailing my previous work experience and my attributes, in addition to providing two references.

What reservations did you have before you started the role (if any)?

I was worried about operating over Zoom as I had little to no experience of hosting classes face-to-face, let alone over something as seemingly temperamental as video conferencing software.

How did you prepare before starting with the Company?

I attended some of the other online classes Age UK were providing as a guest, before leading my own, and found this experience invaluable in assuaging some of my above concerns about using (what I thought to be) temperamental software, and how to go about structuring an online class – a format that, at the time, was pretty alien to me. The staff were very kind and patient with me, giving me lots of time to introduce myself to the members of Age UK Kensington and Chelsea so that when I started hosting my own sessions, I already had a level of rapport with them.

What were the main project(s) that you were working on during your time with the company?

I hosted weekly online poetry sessions for thirteen weeks via Zoom for Age UK Kensington and Chelsea. This involved choosing several individual poems or poets to discuss with the group every session, much like a book club. My session was part of a whole host of others that Age UK had been providing their members with over the course of the COVID-19 lockdown, during spring and into the summer, ranging from Yoga classes to Spanish classes.

FIND *your* FUTURE

Can you tell us a little more about what an average day would entail?

My classes took place every week on a Wednesday afternoon from three until four. This meant that on Wednesday mornings I would set about deciding on my topic for the session – be that a theme that united a few different poems (i.e., ‘cityscapes’) or an individual poet I thought would be good to focus on – and then put together my Word document with the poems and some pictures for presentation in the Zoom session via the ‘Share Screen’ function. I’d normally have an idea in mind a few days before as to what I wanted to focus on, often based around the topical suggestions that the members of previous sessions had put forward.

How did you use the knowledge you had gained from your degree enhance your experience?

As an undergraduate English student, I found myself often applying the literary knowledge gleaned from my lectures and seminars in the sessions; be this a poet’s biographical history, their thematic tendencies, or the contemporary context within which they had been writing. I also found myself at times mimicking some of the techniques I had seen my professors use in seminars in order to elicit answers from participants, (i.e., providing my own opinion about a poem so that someone else could bounce off of it, agree with it, disagree with it etc.) which certainly felt like a strange role reversal.

What were the biggest challenges?

I think the biggest challenge was attempting to overcome my own technical ineptitude and lack of Zoom expertise (turns out not all young people are good with technology). As aforementioned, getting the chance to join other sessions before hosting my own was certainly a good introduction for me to the facilities (and subsequent challenges) that Zoom brings as a medium for social interface. However, some of the biggest challenges remained inextricably linked to the technical limitations of a virtual social interaction – for instance, there was one session where my Wi-Fi connection was so bad, I had to end the session early, unable to hear or be heard. Besides the technical issues there were no real huge challenges that I had to face in hosting these sessions: they were extremely enjoyable.

How did this affect you personally, working within the Charity/NGO Sector?

I think it affected me a great deal. I developed a real connection with the members in the sessions, I think because we had all been brought together by two very disparate and yet somehow conducive entities: a passion for poetry and a global pandemic. And yet, for an hour a week, we were able to forget about the latter and just enjoy reading poetry, and I must say, for the time that I hosted those sessions, they were the thing that I looked forward to most in my week.

What measurable benefits have you seen within the Company, or within the certain areas of the business that you were working in?

I can’t speak to the overall running of Age UK, or even to the Kensington and Chelsea branch thereof, but I do know that as an organization they relied, and still rely, on volunteers to help out with the running of these sessions for their members. I would hope that my volunteering with them meant that they were able to offer one more session than they had before and that by documenting my fantastic experience with them – in a way such as this – will help to encourage other students to get involved and volunteer with organisations like Age UK, and by doing so benefit organisations such as Age UK by, perhaps more importantly, benefitting its members.

FIND *your* FUTURE

What was the most rewarding element of your experience?

The most rewarding element was – as clichéd as it sounds – the feeling of making a difference, even if that difference felt infinitesimal in the grand scheme of this horrible pandemic. It seems to me that I've unduly gained more out of the experience than all the work I put in during my time as a volunteer, which is testament to the experience itself, and to the people I've met over the course of doing it. As I say, for those thirteen weeks it was the thing in my weekly calendar that I most looked forward to.

How has this experience affected your career aspirations/plans?

There's no doubting that my being able to lead weekly classes on poetry, fairly independently, certainly honed my teaching skills and led me to consider academia as a career option to a greater extent than I had done before. However, it has also opened my eyes to how a charity like Age UK operates and, having now seen the fantastic work they do first-hand, I would happily work for them again in the future.