**PODCAST 2: Improving working class inclusion for free**

There are many things you can do for free to attract and welcome people who are working-class and/or in poverty. Some of these may require care and thought to implement, but they don’t cost a penny. The first part of this podcast shares information about creating an inclusive culture, while the rest is about very practical tips on attracting and welcoming working class people.

Psychological safety describes an environment in which people feel safe. They can share opinions and speak about themselves and their lives without fear of judgment or blame. This is really important for everyone, but is especially so for marginalised groups. For working class people it is important not to have to hide their class, their background, their lives, who they are, who their family is, their tastes and so on, in order to be accepted into a very white middle class environment like an independent cinema.

Those of us raised working class have usually spent some time, at least, trying – with varying degrees of success – to pass as middle class in spaces dominated by middle class people. This is for a variety of reasons, which may include shame or being shamed.

A psychologically safe environment is what the best leaders create, so it is worthwhile looking further into it if you’re not already familiar with psychological safety, and you have leadership or managerial responsibilities at any level. It is not enough to introduce new policy or strategy without working to shift a classist culture within an organization.

Working class colleagues and audience members must feel as comfortable as their middle class counterparts. There are numerous easy steps we can take to aid this.

Throw open the doors, rather than shutting people out. Culture is – I think, wrongly – divided into ‘high’ and ‘low’ so arty independent cinema gets a lot more respect than Hollywood blockbusters shown at the local multiplex. But this division about what is and isn’t considered a worthy style of film is also a big part of what excludes. If you’re working for Chanel or Hermès – designer labels – being exclusive, aspirational, unattainable for the majority, works for the brand, but it’s counterproductive for independent cinemas to exclude in such a way.

Advertising is very important. Don’t brand your cinema as exclusive or suchlike, which can repel many people. Consider what you say on your website about demographics. If you discuss things like community or school engagement, don’t talk about areas as ‘deprived’ or people as ‘low class’, for example. Consider, as well, how you talk about audience members who are more affluent, such as when trying to attract advertising revenue. Don’t give the impression that you value these people more. There would be outcry if some venues spoke about race or sexuality in the way they speak about class.

We should try to avoid value judgements about what people like. Ultimately, it doesn’t matter if some people love arty French cinema, others love rom coms, and some love them both equally. What does matter is that everyone has access to all kinds of culture and can make the decision for themselves about whether it’s something they enjoy and want more of.

People need to feel welcome and comfortable in your venue, at your events, when looking at your website, and that’s not just their responsibility. It is about how you and your colleagues communicate with everyone.

Think about microaggressions. Some organisations prefer to refer to these, less confrontationally, as Subtle Acts of Exclusion. Examples of these experienced by working class people include someone who speaks with Received Pronunciation imitating a working class person’s accent, or a colleague who always rolls their eyes or laughs when someone mentions contemporary popular Hollywood films. Microaggressions are frequently only picked up by the person on the receiving end or other people present who share that characteristic so it’s important to be aware of them and take people seriously when they raise microaggressions.

Consider style and tone: not everyone will immediately know how to correctly pronounce the name of a little known German filmmaker, whose name they have only seen written down. And that’s fine. Create a psychologically safe space where they can ask and learn.

Also remember to make references that all audience members will get so don’t fill talks or filmmaker Q&As with mentions to obscure cinema only.

The post-screening drinks reception can be really uncomfortable or inaccessible for many, not just working class people, but those with disabilities or with accompanying children and so on, so consider other ways your venue could support social interaction relating to film, without pressure.

Consider implementing a ‘buddy’ system, in which people with plenty of free time, a working class background, and love of your cinema can befriend and accompany someone who is daunted by the thought of coming in.

Partner with other venues, especially spaces local working class communities trust and feel comfortable in. Don’t worry about screening a film perfectly: screen it, get one of your local, down to earth, working class staff members to host it, and use this as an accessible hook to draw people into your venue.

We also need to consider finances. For those who have little money, going to watch a different kind of film at a different type of cinema, if they can afford it at all, is quite a financial risk. If you’re well paid then a tenner for a ticket doesn’t seem much, but if that ten pounds is all of your leisure money for the entire month then it’s wasted if the film is not enjoyable and the environment is uncomfortable.

A solution to this is offering sliding scale tickets, which don’t identify them as such on the e- or paper ticket. You should also consider offering free or reduced rate memberships, with payment spread out. You can also set up a dedicated fund to give some working class people cheap or free tickets. This can be created by allowing affluent audience members to support the scheme via a monthly direct debit. Many of us raised in poverty, who now have more middle class lifestyles, would happily contribute to share our passion for cinema with others.

For more about tickets and memberships, please do listen to the Welcoming Working Class Audiences podcast.

Whether we are thinking about finances, audiences, or programming, we absolutely need to foreground parenting and caring, because working class people will often have less money to socialise outside of the home, and even less opportunity to do so if they need to pay for childcare.

Consider launching a crèche on weekend mornings, and operating this on a sliding scale from free to perhaps the highest cost of one hour at a nursery or with a babysitter in your area.

Something that is great for people with little money, and especially those with accompanying children, is that independent cinemas don’t usually push expensive refreshments the way others do. Please be kind about people bringing their own snacks. You don’t know whether this is because of limited finances or health reasons.

In addition, have some cheap family friendly options in the café, alongside your usual menu. Again, why be exclusive when you can welcome all budgets and tastes?

Ask around for toy donations so you can keep a box or two of toys in the café for children to play with. Many parents choose a restaurant or bar, based on there being some easy entertainment for their kids there.

Ensure you offer frequent child-friendly activities and films, including several screenings where noise is allowed, and make this very clear in advertising.

Advertise your family friendly measures widely. This is best done, and completely free, by ensuring there are networks of local parents, especially local working class ones, who share how great your venue is through word of mouth.

As a bare minimum, work with local schools, especially those in underfunded and less privileged areas, as you need to ensure children feel comfortable in independent cinemas and film festivals before it’s too late and you totally lose them as future audience members.

Spend some time considering who and what you support through your programming:

Could you support some local emerging filmmakers, especially those who have fewer opportunities? – when we think about how the nepotistic film industry is structured – we need to make more effort to include working class people; Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour; people with disabilities, and so on.

Don’t forget the digital divide and that not everyone has access to the technology needed. Partner with a local organisation or charity so you can loan equipment to local young people to make films, which you then screen, perhaps in a quiet timeslot? This kind of opportunity can be life changing for young people in poverty.

Ensure that a range of colleagues at your organisation have the opportunity to programme, which results in a more diverse range of films, rather than your programme being the result of a small, perhaps homogenous, group of people’s tastes.

Offer some cheaper, shorter ‘taster’ sessions advertised widely so more people can watch films at your venue with less of a financial and time risk.

On the subject of timing, can you make sure most films are screened at a time when public transport will be available as many people don’t have a car or can’t afford taxi home at the end of the night?

And, when programming, think about including matters relating to poverty and class in content notes.

Even with the best of intentions, implementing some of the measures I have just listed will not work as well, unless you can attract and retain happy working class colleagues.

Here we need real inclusion, not just tokenism, and inclusion means having working class colleagues across your organisation, including at the top, if your structure is hierarchical, and that all of your working class colleagues are made to feel as comfortable and welcome as your middle class ones.

Colleagues and audience members should hear a range of accents and at all levels. If there are no local accents at all in senior roles, why not?

Listen to all of your colleagues, and, again, at every levels. This means the most senior person in your organisation will take the time to listen to feedback from the people doing the cleaning and those working in the café bar, but it equally means that the environment is one in which cleaning and hospitality staff are made to feel comfortable speaking to all colleagues.

You absolutely need people with lived experience giving advice and making decisions with regard to working class inclusion, but be mindful of emotional labour and don’t expect this additional work to be done for free or in someone’s own time if equality, diversity, and inclusion work is not officially part of their role.

In order to ensure you have people with a variety of lived experience, you need to cast the net wide when recruiting and ensure this is transparent and fair, reaching beyond existing and, at times, nepotistic networks. Don’t expect the same qualifications and experience from people raised working class and/or in poverty. Give them a chance, with support, to learn and develop.

Think, too, about employing a different recruitment style. Alternatives to the traditional CV, which favours those with the most privilege, include posing four or five role-relevant questions with a word-limited response so irrelevant qualifications aren’t foregrounded, people can draw from life experiences beyond the world of work, and people who have had a career break – whether because of parenting and caring or health matters – are not at a disadvantage.

Another option is to allow people to submit a three or four minute video of themselves talking about why they are right for the job. This can help those for whom presenting information in written form is more difficult and not a key element needed in the role you’re advertising, but if you do offer this, make clear it’s a simple point and shoot with little to no editing, and that you’re choosing based on the content, rather than the style, of the film.

It is imperative the recruitment panel is diverse and they complete unconscious bias activities shortly before the start of recruitment. These could include ‘The Trusted Ten’ or reading up on people who are working class, BIPOC etc. and in roles usually occupied by middle class white people.

To attract and retain working class people, ensure you have flexible and hybrid working policies, and make this clear when recruiting. Because so many roles in film exhibition are not well paid, many people need second jobs.

Transparency about who receives payment is really, really important. Some cinemas and film festivals, for example, pay some workers, volunteers, and guest speakers, while others receive no payment at all. Even worse, the worker ends up truly out of pocket and paying to work, such as fare to get to the venue, childcare fees while they work, or money lost from shifts they could not take at another job. Sometimes there is no policy or logic about who gets paid and who doesn’t. This has to stop. Not only should everyone be paid fairly for their labour, but we need to remember that those with more confidence or certain connections will be more likely to ask for payment if none is offered.

Not just payment, but career development, as well as perks, need to be delivered fairly. These can be things like the opportunity to travel to film festivals, to attend events in which the networking opportunities are of great value for a career in film, and to be the person getting the free lunch. The more valued and engaged a person feels at work, the more happy and productive they are.

The key takeaway from this podcast is to focus on creating a culture within your organisation that is welcoming to and respectful of working class people. Policies and strategy are useless in isolation. Everyone needs to be on board.

For more on audience, staffing, and programming measures in relation to working class inclusion, there’s a podcast elaborating on each of these. And if you can spare some cash, even a small amount, to improve working class inclusion, do turn to the next podcast on Broader Measures.

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