

PERFORMING IMPACT

HOW DOES COMMUNITY THEATRE UNDERSTANDS AND EVALUATE ITS WORK?



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SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH

Evaluation is an essential part of community theatre practice: companies are called upon to provide evidence of the artistic activities they engage in, and how those activities have impact on the performers and on the communities within which they take place. Those imperatives, which often arise from the need to justify community arts projects to funding bodies, have tended to require evaluation focussed on summative outcomes. These evaluations most often use the vocabulary and concepts of the social sciences, talking in terms of social impacts and statistics, when accounting for their effects.

This scoping study was undertaken to investigate the potential of a different set of evaluative vocabularies, which would attend more to the distinctive nature of arts practices and concentrate on processes instead of outcomes. Exploring the literature in the arts and humanities around aesthetics, memory, performance, heritage and place, the study sought alternative ways of understanding and making visible the impacts which community arts have. It also focuses on the potentials of formative evaluation approaches which capture processes which community theatre practitioners hold as of equal significance to the final product.

We suggest that there is a productive role for the inclusion of arts-focused accounts of community theatre projects and their effects and that this would repay further research. Our consultations with community theatre practitioners and arts policy makers suggests that there is potential and enthusiasm for trialing formative evaluation focused on aesthetic processes.

WHAT WE DID

Literature Review

In order to address the problems of summative evaluation couched in social science terminologies and ideas, we undertook an investigation of scholarship across several interlocking areas. We focused in the main on research with an arts and humanities focus as we felt this could provide a vocabulary with which to enrich existing discussions around community theatre and its evaluation. Instead of following up one particular theoretical line, we examined scholarship on aesthetics, memory, performance, heritage and place, staying alert to the ways in which these diverse theoretical resources could be brought to bear on the question of arts processes and their impact. A cluster of themes, some cutting across disciplinary boundaries, arose from this reading and discussion, which will be elaborated in the next section of this report.

The Performing Impact Blog

Having identified some ways in which we felt arts and humanities scholarship could contribute to the conversation around community theatre's impact, we wanted to present these ideas to practitioners and those involved in community arts more generally. We established a blog – www.performingimpactproject.wordpress.com - and posted relatively concise pieces outlining the ideas we had developed. We hoped that the blog format, and the style of writing it required, would enable us to engage with artistic communities and readerships outside higher education. We shaped each piece as a question, asking practitioners what seemed useful about our findings, and where they found an echo in the practical experiences of community theatre.

Workshop with community theatre practitioners

Our workshop took place over two days, and included the members of the project, a wider team of academics specialising in drama and performance and creative industries partnerships, community arts practitioners and members of arts administration organizations. The practitioners had been directed to our blog posts, and made presentations about the way they worked and their past experiences. A lengthy series of open conversations took place, in which different theoretical perspectives were mingled with anecdotes and the view from the practical end of community arts. We took notes of these conversations, and

received permission for them to become part of our report, provided they were anonymised.

Consultations

After the workshop, we held in-depth personal consultations with three key individuals with experience of community arts both regionally and nationally. Their identities have likewise been removed from the report, to allow them to speak freely about their view of the current situation.

WHAT WE FOUND IN THE LITERATURE

Our investigation of the arts and humanities literature provided a cluster of topics which seemed to provide themes for envisioning the processes of community theatre. We have already reported on this in the scoping study discussion paper¹. Our literature review also provided a possible over-arching evaluation framing, in the form of the *Delors Report, Learning: The Treasure Within*.

The Delors Report

The Delors Report, published by UNESCO, offers a framework for thinking about the goals of education, which we found persuasive in approaching the potential benefits community theatre may enable for participants. It categorises these goals in four “pillars”: Learning to know, Learning to do, Learning to live together and Learning to be.

Heritage

Heritage is framed by Lowenthal as involving aggression and exclusion, whereas Samuel calls it a “social form of knowledge”(p. 8) through which people engage with the past and to make sense of the world in which they find themselves. Nicholson’s work on applied theatre, which draws on gift theory, allows us to frame community theatre as an interaction between two kinds of heritage, throwing attention onto both the practitioners and participants in this space of heritage exchange.

Embodiment and affect

Ideas on embodiment offered potential to talk about the distinctive value of community theatre as an art in which people were present to one another in an unmediated sense (see Phelan). Work around affect by Callard and Papoulias drew attention towards the way experiences – aesthetic and learning included - take place at the physical level.

Time, fulfilment and craft

¹ The scoping study is available on <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/Funding-Opportunities/Research-funding/Connected-Communities/Scoping-studies-and-reviews/Documents/Performing%20Impact.pdf>

Gadamer and Bakhtin both provided a strong theoretical base for discussions of time used in a non-instrumental way, for its own sake and for the value people could find in it. This intersects usefully with Sennett's notion of "craft", which valorises activity which contains its own reward and is not subject to market forces for its valuation.

Recognition and Representation

Fraser's concept of "(mis) recognition" opens up a space to think about the ways marginalized communities have their identities and ways of life devalued by institutions and the media. Community theatre might provide an equivalent space for local knowledge to be validated and represented as worthwhile. Brecht and Diamond both provide perspectives on the positive and negative effects which seeing themselves represented have on people.

THE PROVOCATION

We began our blog with the following post which set out, in plain language, the problems that we suspected were common concerns about evaluation expectations of community theatre practitioners. We hoped that this post would set the scene for the consultation to follow.

problems with current evaluation models

Most community arts practitioners that we know and have conducted research with are concerned by the kinds of evaluations that they are asked to do because:
Evaluations are based on one-off projects

While it is true that some people do undergo remarkable changes in a few short weeks, being apparently transformed by the experience of participation, this is not the case for everyone. For some people, trying to get them to say what benefits they have gained at the immediate end of a project may actually reveal little. All that they may be able to say at the end of one project is that they had a good time, or that they'd quite like to be involved in another one.

People respond differently to the experience of community theatre, and for some people, some of the kinds of goals that funders are interested might just take a lot longer than one project. But this continued involvement may or may not happen, as it is very tied to funding, and there may well be a considerable time lapse between one project and the next, even if a repeat is funded.

They use outcomes which are hard to measure

A lot of the things that funders look for are big and general – a sense of well-being for example. What do you look for if you are trying to see if someone has 'better well being' than they had before they were involved in a community theatre project? And how do you know if it actually does generalize to other parts of their lives?

Evaluations typically rely on a few crude indicators and what participants say. But sometimes it is just plain hard to articulate what you've got from something. A lot of learning for example happens without us necessarily realizing it at the time, and it's only later that we become conscious of the fact that we know things that we once didn't.

They generally ignore the artistic dimensions of participation.

Projects that are funded in order to produce education, health or citizenship outcomes work as if the theatre is merely a means to something else - rather than a benefit in its own right. Extending the aesthetic and artistic possibilities of individuals and communities is too often ignored in required evaluations.

When we look at evaluations we are inclined to say that funders' evaluation requirements could be said to operate with some of the same dimensions as the political agendas that produce their funding.

They suffer from short termism. They expect unrealistic outcomes and demand that these be promised at the outset. This places practitioners in the position of having to spin the evaluations in order to avoid punishment/secure more funding in the future.

They operate using a cause and effect rationality. It is as if community theatre is a kind of medicine which will cure social ills. All that needs to happen is that people take the pill on offer and they will be cured of whatever problem they are perceived to have.

They prefer pseudo-scientific approaches to evaluation – numbers, graphs and pre and post tests are seen as reliable and valid, even though they are equally as subject to definition and manipulation as interviews and other kinds of documentation.

We know that community theatre practitioners are keen to get beyond these kinds of evaluations. We also know that some already work outside of funding guidelines to develop different ways of documenting and understanding the effects of what they do.

How do you manage these kinds of evaluation demands? Do you have alternative practices that you are prepared to share?

This blog post aroused most interest during the project, and even though the site has remained static since the beginning of the consultation phase, this post continues to get hits and tweets. This level of interest suggests to us that there is considerable mileage in pursuing this work in partnership with practitioners.

WHAT WE LEARNT FROM THE WORKSHOP

The two day workshop was attended by eleven practitioners, and three theatre academics in addition to the three of us.

The workshop provided a fascinating opportunity for us to engage with presentations by practitioners working in various forms of applied theatre, and host a general discussion on the evaluation issues our blog had raised. The conversations ranged widely, from the particular issues the practitioners found themselves dealing with on a day to day level, to the broader themes such as art's purpose and the meaning of community. Some of these questions intersected with the research we had done for the scoping study, and some others highlighted areas we had not considered, which could benefit from further analysis. We have grouped the issues below, making it clear where there was a consensus or differing points of view, whilst maintaining the anonymity of our participants.

Enjoyment, learning and affect

As we mentioned in our later blog posts, the question of "enjoyment" arose in surprising ways during the workshop discussions. One practitioner suggested that "everyone enjoyed themselves" was a frequent response to their events, but that they had never seen it on an evaluation form. It was, they argued, an intrinsic part of what made their projects valuable and encouraged people to engage with them.

There were some contradictory views on this topic (which overlaps with the issue of artistic practice discussed below), as some felt that stressing the simple enjoyment to be gained from community arts risked hollowing out the account of them. After all, sports clubs have a very successful time marketing a particular kind of "enjoyment" at both grassroots and multi-national corporation level. If we could offer nothing more powerful than that, it would be simpler to concentrate on sports projects, since "you don't have to persuade someone they're going to like football".

This discussion of enjoyment was nuanced by some formal research conducted by a company who worked with children. Their research indicated that the strongest learning took place when participation and emotional involvement were present. This suggests a potential for a richer concept of "enjoyment", and speaks to the

insights from scholars of embodiment and affect in our research. Enjoyment would be framed not simply as an add-on, or an initial treat to get participants involved, but as a continual and essential part of the artistic and learning process. This domain could potentially be linked to evaluative methods involving audience members; they might be encouraged to respond to performances in creative ways such as drawing, methods which have their own enjoyment value.

The question of enjoyment also intersected with our emphasis on process, since several practitioners felt that there were many moments during a project where enjoyment or pleasure were not always the strongest emotions in the room. Instead there was anxiety, fear or irritation, but these were necessary to the artistic process and the development of the performance. If judged solely against enjoyment as the criteria for success, the performance work should have ceased at these points. There was no consensus – though an interesting discussion - over how far the practitioner has the right to encourage participants to undergo experiences they might find unpleasant on the basis that they might enjoy it when the project was completed. This certainly seems to suggest that the focus on process could require a variety of criteria applied at different points in the project.

Purpose and product

An intriguing discussion emerged around what should be identified as the “point” or “purpose” of community theatre. In some senses, it was suggested, the performance can be regarded as a by-product of the project, the residue left over when the real reaction has taken place. This reversed many assumptions familiar to us from performance studies, which often treats the moment of performance as the centre of attention, whilst relegating other aspects such as script-writing to a subordinate role. A description of funding bodies as “seduced by the allure of the by-product [the social impacts]” expressed a shared disquiet at the dislocation between the way they conceived their work’s purpose, and the vision held by funders.

Practitioners agreed that there needed to be some sense of purpose, though it was impossible to pin down what the single or exact “point” might be towards which a project travels, even when it arrives. This seemed to reflect Kant’s principles of aesthetic autonomy, that art displays “purposiveness without purpose”. Though often discounted in many discussions of art which is socially engaged in some way, we wondered whether Kant provided a robust model for insisting on the integrity of

an art project's internal logic, as well as expressing the sense that it involved people jointly focussing on a common "purpose".

This sense of purpose needed to be responsive to – or indeed shaped by – the participants, it was declared. "Kids know if the process is crap, they care about the meaning of it." Whilst artistic practice and integrity is vitally important for the practitioners (as discussed below), there was agreement that the "purpose", whatever that might be, had to be shared and owned by everyone who took part in the project.

Artistic practice

"There's a need for the system to trust an artist when they say 'This is right'". This statement summed up a lot of the feelings expressed during the discussions about how questions of artistic practice must be central to evaluation. The stress laid on the distinctiveness of artistic work during the talk about enjoyment was part of a larger concern with the value associated with it.

On a practical level, artistic value was seen as necessary to keep the attention of the participants and to protect the artist from burn-out or boredom. (A store of evaluation forms were mentioned ironically as a way some practitioners motivated themselves when they needed a boost in enthusiasm.) Some, though not all, believed there was a gap in evaluative schemes where an appreciation of artistic quality should have been. Of course, this is a difficult matter to measure, but simply acknowledging it in a subjective way was seen by many as a potential step forward. This was tied at one point to three overlapping areas: the quality of the art work or performance, the quality of experience for the participants, and the experience the community got out of it. This last was strongly linked to artistic skill, since, for some participants, the artistic quality of their performance could cause the wider community to regard them differently. The aesthetic value of their art was itself part of the social impact.

The distinctive value of aesthetic work was also advanced as part of its appeal: "Theatre is different: you get to talk about emotion and character". Theatre was described as a transformative experience, which connected to the ways people conceive of themselves and the people around them. There was some frustration at being treated by funding bodies as a social impact provider who happened to use artistic methods, rather than as a group who were delivering a valuable artistic

experience. This could, some argued, be helped by the rest of the arts "scene" treating community theatre as part of their field, for example by giving it professional critical attention and press coverage. The assumption by funding bodies that "peer review" could get around this issue was criticized as paying too little attention to the specificity and variety of the art projects.

There was a continuing interest in what artistic practice actually is, and how to bring questions of evaluation into dialogue with the daily adjustments that theatre artists make in their own practice, a continual process of self-evaluation from inside the art. But, it was asserted, this is a very different matter from asking what artistic product or experience for participants might be, and we need to not blur those lines. This was connected with the wider notion of "integrity", both in artistic and ethical terms, of a project.

Evaluation issues

Evaluation itself aroused a number of common feelings amongst the practitioners. There was a general agreement that evaluative material needed to be used for future work, though one cautioned against using it as "The Oracle" which determined future creative direction. The talk of stacks of paper being dumped in cupboards suggested that some form of digital storage, repository or network which could be used to exchange and share evaluative material could be useful. A number of participants felt that simply being able to meet in a venue like the one we had provided, to workshop and swap experiences was valuable.

The warping effects of current evaluation were widely discussed. These included the steering of projects towards outcomes which were easily measurable, the competitive system which discouraged practitioners from sharing stories of failure or drastic learning, and the way an artistic set of evaluations might narrow the appeal of a project to funding bodies. "Evaluation inflation" was also mentioned, with projects ticking all the required boxes but being labelled "standard" and not funded. The inherently transformative nature of community theatre was seen as a potential problem for current evaluative models: "How can you say to a funding body 'We want to work with people who don't know how to do this stuff. I don't know if it'll be a success: as I mentioned, they don't know how to do this stuff.'" The issue of being articulate meant that more weight might be given to those who were already proficient in expressing themselves persuasively, whereas participants with less fluency might find themselves sidelined or under-valued.

The distinction between outward-facing and inward-facing evaluation, between “proving and improving” was felt to be necessary. Researchers, embedded ethnographers and their fieldnotes were cited as useful, potentially serving several purposes. Within the projects they could enable practitioners to carry out some parts of their role without needing to build in a layer of evaluation where this would be impractical and they might garner responses from participants which might not be forthcoming to the artists themselves. More generally there was the potential for academic-practitioner partnerships to provide a basis for productive exchanges which could inform future work for both (a possibility the Arts Council have expressed interest in.)

Community and participation

There was a strong stress on the importance of local knowledge, and the value of community theatre in a location which might no longer have a pub or a shop to act as a social space. The diversity of “communities” was an important issue to focus on: using the term vaguely meant that it was sometimes unclear what funders expected projects to do, and how they were imagined as interacting with the community. The term community appears across both arts and social science research, and its ubiquity may obscure the different assumptions which underpin it in different academic contexts. The need to unpack this term – and make clear the ideological baggage which it carries in various arenas – is made more urgent by its appearance in political and government rhetoric.

This suspicion of vague terminology developed at one point into a suspicion of the concept itself. Why, one practitioner asked, do we assume that “community” is an unqualified good, whatever it means? Its appearance as a buzzword, used to denote fuzzy feel-good notions of “belonging” and “authenticity”, had the potential to obscure the problematic aspects of how communities operated. This concern echoed some of the issues which arose in our research into “heritage”, particularly the ideas of Lowenthal. His work could pry away the idea of “participation” and “inclusivity” from the notion of “community”, since communities are frequently defined by exclusion. Participation itself also came under scrutiny as an idea used too vaguely to evaluate the success of projects. Participation in what, and to what effect?

On a different note, it was suggested that evaluative practices could help build a sense of participation, as turning attention onto the audience could validate their experiences. The long tail or “afterglow” of artistic projects within a community, which many practitioners stressed, could be increased and sustained by the right kind of evaluation, which situated a wider group as the “owners” of what had happened.

WHAT WE LEARNT FROM EXTERNAL CONSULTATIONS

Following up on the findings and expressions of interest that the workshop had initiated around evaluation practices, we met with three representative stakeholders in the field including two whom we will call A (4.1.13), B (9.1.13) and C (15.1.13). It was difficult for us to access the range of people we wanted to talk with, in large part because of competing demands, and reorganisations and redundancies in arts organisations.

A has worked extensively with the Arts Council in a particular region as a mentor and evaluator but is also self-publishing outcomes from community arts based projects in that region relevant to our study. Their search for more 'honest' approaches and labels for evaluation was particularly helpful. We spoke early on about the need to think about evaluation combined with monitoring and the effect this had on any claims or aspirations to impact picking up anxieties among practitioners about the right to fail in certain projects of this kind.

This exchange enabled us to articulate our work as helping practitioners, through our theoretical and methodological research, to an awareness of a theory of change which needed to figure in any evaluation process. We were seeking to move perceptions away from evaluation as something to get through and as a means to an end, and towards evaluation as a learning and development opportunity. The important point was made that it should increasingly be possible to encourage community theatre groups to engage intellectually and indeed 'honestly' with evaluation by seeing it as a means to Continuous Professional Development (CPD) and skills acquisition.

We picked up on workshop discussions around ethical consent forms and the inhibition to outcomes certain processes can cause. How we liberate community participants to feel free to experiment, while seeking to evaluate in a tangible and reportable way, remains a methodological challenge and connected us back to earlier discussions in workshop around the practical use of ethnographers, academic field notes etc, which then freed the practitioners to do their work unhindered. This raises some interesting questions for academic involvement in formative evaluation in the future in community arts-based projects.

We did discuss the importance of using qualitative research stemming from epidemiology though that was not the remit of this project. We discussed our wish to step away from an end-user approach focussed on government and funding councils per se towards a practitioner focussed discussion of artistic 'values' and process. A raised a key question about how self-conscious we sought to make the process of formative evaluation and how much that might close down the very experiences we are seeking to capture.

They also rightly asked who we are looking to open that process up to, and this again goes back to helpful discussions at the workshop about where evaluation goes, who uses it and shares it. The workshop opened up to us the real possibilities of peer-review elements to the evaluative processes. Perhaps that involves shifting a sense of where the expertise in evaluation lies but also exploring the skills training needed?

B represents the Arts Council in the region where A operates, and our discussion with her was able to build on the findings of the dialogue with A. B confirmed for us that our case for a renewed focus on artistic process in evaluation was absolutely pertinent to an attempt to refocus emphases in the Arts Council. Excellence in artistic practice should always lead to the kinds of impacts and social effects that were currently driving approaches to writing evaluation documents and there need as a result to be a recalibration of approaches. We also discussed the need for a more organised sharing of evaluation and its findings between creative practitioners than is currently effected.

We were able to explore in some detail the potential of HEIs as collaborators and facilitators of policy change agenda in the Arts. To that end we touched on the value of a regional consortium of HEI partners on regional arts projects as well as community theatre and arts groups since this seemed likely to map onto Arts Council restructuring in the region. Overall our project had clear relevance to current Arts Council thinking, not in terms of influencing direct changes to policy-making on evaluation per se but certainly in terms of feeding into the narrative and awareness-raising that is being built around the key concept of artistic excellence in future Arts Council strategy and the new landscape of partnerships and consortia in which HEIs in the region could be key players.

C holds a national portfolio for training for people in the creative industries. He was supportive of our approach to formative evaluation but raised the issue of potential complacency of community theatre practitioners and the value of external evaluation in providing a critical challenge. Like A, he suggested that many community arts practitioners were insufficiently informed about evaluation, and often failed to see its relevance to their own professional learning. He was happy to be partner in any project we might undertake to trial new approaches to evaluation, and to think about what this might have to say to the current training offer to apprentices in the creative industries.

We concluded after these consultations that there was both interest and support for further work in the area, and particularly for the involvement of higher education with the community theatre, and community arts sectors, more generally.

A POTENTIAL MODEL?

We presented this idea for a new framework to the workshop participants and there was interest in pursuing it further. The notion using film as a means of recording process was also of interest to practitioners.

	Short term	Mid term	Long term
Artistic : formative <i>Performers</i> <i>Audience</i> <i>Community</i>			
Artistic: summative <i>Performers</i> <i>Audience</i> <i>Community</i>			
Social: formative <i>Performers</i> <i>Audience</i> <i>Community</i>			
Social: summative <i>Performers</i> <i>Audience</i> <i>Community</i>			
Organisational: formative			
Organisational: summative			

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