

MEASUREMENT AND EVALUATION

A keynote speech by Sanjiv Lingayah

Sanjiv Lingayah explained how a participative process can lead to measurement and evaluation which recognises the intangible value of arts activity and its contribution to the quality of life.

The New Economics Foundation is a research charity. Its aim is to put people and the environment at the centre of economic thinking. It promotes an understanding of the quality of life based on complex measures, recognising the difference between value and money. It's not only counted in pounds and pence. In trying to understand and measure quality of life, we realised that there are untold riches in our society and environment – things like the arts, that bring people together, excite people, trigger vivid thoughts. These are all part of those untold riches. We also know that many of the things we do as an economy damage our environment, but this story is never told – and measurement and evaluation are all about telling a true story. So we need to measure intangibles as well as tangibles, because by making these impacts visible, we can see in all our organisations whether we're having the influence on quality of life that we might want.

So prove it . . .

The challenge, though, is to prove the value of the arts to others. Many of us have gut feelings about the things that we do and the difference that we make, and we may hear stories of the impact on individuals or communities, but the current environment needs you to prove it, because funding doesn't come easily; because the arts are traditionally thought of as a middle-class woolly liberal preserve; but also because the challenges laid down for the arts are getting tougher and more important – witness Gerry Robinson in his New Statesman speech, saying that creativity is the key to promoting economic prosperity and educational achievement; and the PAT 10 work on evaluation, seeing the arts as a mechanism for social inclusion.

Reasons to measure

As part of proving the value of the arts there is a role for measurement. Often there's quite a lot of resistance to measurement, but there are some very good reasons to measure in a tight funding environment. It's important to demonstrate value for money; to make visible the difference you make, and to build capacity – those involved in measurement have to learn precise skills so that they can ask tough questions, and ask the right questions. Most importantly, measurement gives an understanding of where you are today, but also influences where you head, and it informs future directions.

Tools for measurement

Based on the adage that what gets counted counts, indicators have proliferated; but these days there are probably too many indicators in the world. Indeed, they are issued forth from every organisation, but the ratio of indicators to changes in behaviour is painfully low. Although I am an advocate of measuring, only do it if you are going to listen to the answers. Otherwise it's simply locking up resources.

'Indicators' are particular tools that can be used to measure. They measure, or quantify. But they also simplify, like a map; and they communicate. They tell you something isn't right, just like a high body temperature tells you that the body is not well. The key is to measure important issues and events as a basis for action.

Developing indicators

What should the indicators be for the arts? And what are the outcomes – engagement, imagination, confidence, expanding horizons? The journey of discovering what matters to the organisation (the process) and what should be measured is almost as important as the product. The process we've used is participative, and has six stages.

1. *Bringing people together* The starting point is to bring stakeholders together. You can't develop good evaluation or indicators in a dark room on your own. We need to measure the important things, and it's not only the people who run those organisations who know what the important things are. Other stakeholders are key as well.
2. *Identifying issues* When the 'measurement army' is together, you can identify issues and the things that are worth measuring – the types of impact you'd like to see, and you'd like to see how well you're doing.
3. *Choosing indicators* Having identified the issues, you can develop indicators, e.g. in a community project, an indicator may be the number of friends that community participants make through being part of the project.
4. *Collecting data* Next you have to collect the data. You normally need to either ask people, or observe behaviour.
5. *Communicating findings* This is very important. The indicators will tell you about the impact that you're making, but in order for that to be a spur to change or take new types of actions, people need to know about that story. Quite often. After collecting the data, everyone is so exhausted that they don't want to tell anyone what they found. But it is crucial.
6. *Taking action* This isn't just the last step, because throughout this process, different ways of behaviour may have been observed.

Learning from other experience

Groundwork make 'grey space' into green, community-friendly space. They were struggling to understand their impact, because the most important impacts aren't the easiest to collect. So they tended to use measures like numbers of trees planted (the arts equivalent might be 'bums on seats'). These aren't meaningless, but are not necessarily at the heart of the impact of the organisation. They felt that their biggest impact was in bringing people together, and building relationships within the community. That impact is known differently in different places – sometimes 'community spirit', sometimes 'social capital'; but we call it 'social energy', which we think reflects the impact that Groundwork makes. (The evaluation process used for Groundwork was written up in a handbook, entitled *Prove It!*)

Social energy is broken down into three strands for measurement:

1. 'About me' – what community participants got out of being involved in Groundwork projects, e.g. personal attitudes – percentage proud of this area.
2. 'About us' – community relationship, e.g. percentage who believe that neighbours around here look out for each other.
3. 'Us and them' – the way that the community relates to external agencies, e.g. percentage of local people who know who to contact to help them from the council.

Each element is measured at the beginning of the project, and again at the end, when we hope people will give more positive answers than they did before their involvement.

This approach might be appropriate for arts organisations, but it poses as many questions as it produces answers:

- Which stakeholders should be involved in an evaluation of arts activity?
- At what level should we measure? Should it be projects, or the organisation as a whole?
- Which impacts to measure? What is the most important story, e.g. social inclusion, social energy?
- How to build measuring in so that your funders are happy, and it is elegant and not an additional burden? How do we avoid 'slitting the skylark's throat to see what makes him sing'?

Whatever the answers to these, it's no longer possible to argue that a participative approach to measuring value can't be done – that it's too complex, that it lacks rigour or is subjective. The challenge is there, so is the technology ...

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