

**My essential reads:
Co-creating value through audience
engagement**

by Professor Ben Walmsley

CENTRE FOR
CULTURAL VALUE

Background

My essential reads have been selected to share some key ideas from leading practitioners and researchers about how cultural value can be co-created with audiences and participants in a democratic and collaborative way. What interests me about this kind of thinking is not only that it opens up questions of cultural value to a more diverse range of voices, but also that it provides a meaningful way of engaging with audiences and enhancing their existing relationships with arts and culture and with their favourite cultural organisations.

Before moving into academia, I worked as a theatre producer and manager. I have always been fascinated not only by the value that audiences incur by engaging with arts and culture but also by the value of what they bring to arts and cultural activities in return – by questions of meaning-making, catharsis, artistic insight and interpretation. But I was often (and still am) frustrated by the fact that audiences are systematically left out of the meaning-making phases of arts and cultural activities.

I believe that opportunities for collective meaning-making will enable cultural organisations to build stronger, more productive relationships with their audiences, which will be vital if they are to recover and rebuild from the devastation wreaked by the Covid-19 crisis. So I have chosen the following pieces because they all offer unique insights into how co-creating value can radically enhance cultural experiences for both cultural producers and audiences.

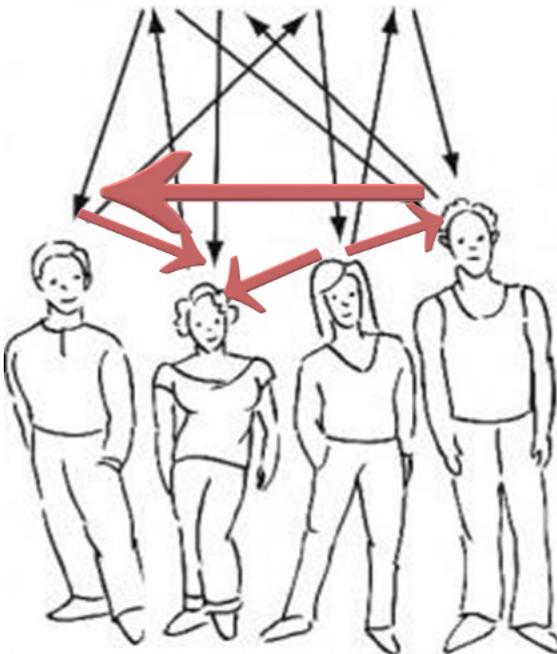


Figure 1: The Engaged Organisation
(adapted from Nina Simon's Participatory Institution, 2010)

My Essential Reads

1. [Making sense of audience engagement: A critical assessment of efforts by nonprofit arts organizations to engage audiences and visitors in deeper and more impactful arts experiences](#)

by Alan S. Brown and Rebecca Razkin (2011)

This lively report describes the different processes involved in effective audience engagement. It provides a set of useful models and frameworks that help to deconstruct what can be an obscure concept. Based on interviews with cultural practitioners, it explores different dimensions of engagement and develops a typology of engagement from the audience perspective, which segments audiences psychographically according to their propensity for engagement, rather than the usual taste-based or geo-demographic segmentation models.

The highlight for me is the ‘Arc of Engagement’, which breaks down engagement in a linear way, starting with the ‘build-up’ and ‘preparation’ for the core activity of ‘artistic exchange’ before moving onto the processing and legacy phases. The beauty of this for me is the focus on engagement as an audience-centred longitudinal process; an exchange that incorporates aspects of anticipation and reception and that focuses on sense-making and long-term impact.

2. [Who gets to tell the meaning? Building audience enrichment](#)

by Lynne Conner (2004)

In this short essay, Lynne explores the concept of the ‘arts experience’, which, she argues, incorporates three complementary components: the artist, the ‘art object’, and the audience. In other words, meaning doesn’t reside a priori in a work of art: it is co-created only through processes of discussion, exchange and negotiation. Audiences are a vital component of the meaning-making process, even though they are often shut out of them and/or treated as recipients, rather than co-creators, of cultural value.

Lynne presents audiences as ‘intelligent consumers’ who are eager to ‘talk productively’ about their artistic encounters when given the right kind of acknowledgement, stimulus, and facilitation. By focusing on ‘audience enrichment’, Lynne offers a welcome antidote to the ever-growing body of literature on audience development: she is interested here in depth, rather than breadth, of engagement, which is an under-explored area of research.

What I value most about this piece is that Lynne presents audiences as co-authors of arts experiences. She argues that audiences don’t want to be told what art means but rather that they seek meaningful opportunities to participate in determining its meaning. This, she argues, places an onus on cultural organisations to develop platforms (face-to-face and online) that enable the open exchange of the complex ideas, experiences and feelings that constitute the arts experience.

3. [The participatory museum](#) by Nina Simon (2016)

I continue to find this book a go-to source for inspirational examples of how cultural organisations can open themselves up to become more relevant and vital to their communities while increasing their earned income. There is an abundance of knowledge and curatorial insight contained within the book, not least the welcome focus on experience design and ‘multi-directional content experiences’.

I particularly value Nina’s calls for meaningful engagement and her tips on how to encourage audiences to dwell, reflect and share in ways that generate meaning for themselves and for others. Two classic examples are the use of typewriters to slow down audiences’ thought processes when constructing love letters; and the engagement of multiple senses (i.e. touch, taste and smell) to evoke deeper memories and interpretations. And who can forget Nina’s depiction of art as a dog? A social object that brings diverse types of people together whose paths would not normally cross.

4. [Audience knowledge digest: Why people visit museums and galleries, and what can be done to attract them](#) by Morris Hargreaves McIntyre (2007)

In order to realise the full potential of effective audience engagement to generate cultural value, it is vital to understand what motivates people to engage with culture in the first place. This report offers an extensive review of existing research into what motivates audiences to visit museums and galleries, offering a whistle-stop tour of insights into the thought processes at play when people decide whether or not to go to a museum.

Morris Hargreaves McIntyre identify four key drivers of attendance: social, intellectual, emotional and spiritual. However, they discern some fascinating differences in visitor motivation between museums and art galleries – finding, for example, that almost half of all museum visits are socially driven, compared with just 30% for art galleries. For both museums and galleries, just over a third of visits are driven by intellectual motives while between 11 and 14% attend for emotional stimulation.

The emergence of the spiritual driver reflects the findings of a 2007 study by Alix Slater, which found that museum and gallery visitors seek an escape from their everyday lives in places of fantasy and peace. However, it contrasts starkly with my own research into theatre audiences, which identified the pursuit of emotional impact as the primary driver. This all highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of audiences across different cultural activities.¹

¹ Andrew McIntyre has subsequently incorporated this thinking into the 7 Pillars of Audience Focus framework, which he outlines [here](#) in relation to culture in lockdown.

5. [Anthropology is not ethnography](#) by Tim Ingold (2007)

This paper is a transcript of a lively talk given by Tim Ingold to the British Academy in 2008, and I've chosen it as an essential read because it inspired me to conduct audience research in a fundamentally different way.

Although, as the title suggests, the talk explores the differences between ethnography and anthropology, what Tim does here brilliantly is to outline the philosophies and approaches of these two people-centred methods. I always think of good audience researchers as anthropologists, and Tim describes the main objective of anthropology as to engage in 'participatory dialogue'. Anthropologists, he argues, function most effectively when they work and study with people, immersed alongside them in what he calls 'an environment of joint activity'.

So anthropological methods require researchers to engage actively with participants rather than observing how they behave from a distance, which would be a more ethnographic approach. This distinction influenced me to 'hang out' with audiences in and around theatres rather than interview them in a more formal way after a theatre experience, and I realised that this approach not only reduced the typical power imbalance between researchers and participants but also developed a more open and trusting relationship, which in turn generated deeper and more personal insights into cultural value.

6. [The art of with](#) by Charles Leadbeater (2009)

Sticking with the idea of doing things with rather than to, for or on audiences, this provocative essay essentially argues that although arts and culture should offer a space for contemplation and deeper purpose, they are often just as commodified as factories. Charles urges arts and cultural organisations to behave more like great social enterprises, which embody 'the principle of with' by identifying issues alongside people and encouraging peer-to-peer exchange.

This way of working challenges traditional power structures and hierarchies, because, Charles maintains, the organisations of the future will increasingly resemble networks, partnerships and collaborations. For cultural organisations, this implies that audiences would not need to wait for permission to engage with art and that cultural value would have to be negotiated and coproduced. This is because art is essentially 'inter-subjective and dialogic': it exists to provoke open, high quality and challenging conversations 'with diverse and surprising contributors'.

7. [Participations on participation: Researching the 'active' theatre audience](#) by Matthew Reason (2015)

As an editorial to a special issue of the online journal *Participations*, this piece provides a great overview of recent research into theatre audiences. The collection of articles that Matthew reviews all reject the notion of audiences as passive observers, instead exploring different ways in which forward-thinking artists and producing companies engage with audiences as participants to offer them a 'level of agency'. This argument lies at the heart of Jacques Rancière's acclaimed book, *The Emancipated Spectator* and Matthew points out that although not all participatory art is actually emancipatory, it does tend to position participants as co-creators of their own experiences, enabling them to move beyond conventional rules of behaviour.

Another strength of this piece is its focus on the quality of the audience-performer relationship. While much has been written about co-creation and audience engagement, there is very little research into what constitutes high quality practice in this area, nor into the correlation between different types and standards of audience engagement and corresponding levels of impact. Accordingly, Matthew concludes his editorial by considering the pros and cons of a spectrum or hierarchy of participation: "Both the difficulty and the desirability of a typology of audience participation would be that it would fix what are inherently fluid relationships, which is a final reminder of why empirical audience research has such value."

Summary

Back in 2002, Nicolas Bourriaud argued that art offers spaces for alternative forms of sociability, criticality and conviviality, and that it is therefore more of an 'encounter' than an 'object'. What unites these different pieces is their common focus on art and culture as sites of encounter, of human interaction and engagement. All of them act as provocations or calls to action – to engage in meaningful ways with audiences in order to generate the kinds of individual and collective meanings that make our lives special and purposeful. This, for me, is what lies at the heart of cultural value, and it is what drives the activities of the Centre for Cultural Value.

Biography

Ben is Professor of Cultural Engagement in the School of Performance and Cultural Industries at the University of Leeds and Director of the national Centre for Cultural Value. Prior to his academic career, he worked as a Producer at the National Theatre of Scotland.

Since 2014 Ben has been the Academic Director of the Arts Fundraising and Philanthropy Programme, which is now one of Arts Council England's National Portfolio Organisations.

Ben is the Co-Editor of Arts and the Market and has published widely on arts marketing, arts management, cultural policy and cultural value. His monograph Audience Engagement in the Performing Arts: A critical analysis was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2019. Ben's other research is available online here. Twitter: @benwalmsley



Glossary of key terms

Audience engagement: activities and/or processes designed to develop intimate, meaningful and enduring relationships with audiences by involving them in interactive and interpretive experiences.

Audience enrichment: the positive impact of engagement activities and/or processes as experienced by audiences; a philosophy that prioritises depth of engagement over breadth.

Co-creation: participatory processes and practices that open-up any part of the creative process to audiences and the wider public; an umbrella term which encompasses aspects of collaboration, interaction, invention, value, meaning and exchange between cultural producers and audiences or participants.

Call to action...

What's the most useful reading you've done in this topic area? What did you learn? How does it relate to your practice and/or to policy? If you'd like to share your reflections and learning with us, please get in touch at ccv@leeds.ac.uk and we'll feed this into a future resource. And please let us know if you'd like to submit a case study or contribute to a podcast or webinar on this theme.



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