

# Art Education Research No. 1/2010

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## Revisiting Evaluation

### 1. Introduction

The writer Saville Kushner, commenting on the difficulty of evaluating participatory arts projects taking place in education contexts, once observed that «Evaluation – as a representation of human experience – is an intractable a problem as the art it observes and all evaluators can ever do is their best». The need for evaluators to ‘do their best’ is increasingly important as policy makers, funding bodies, project co-ordinators and participants recognise the need for effective evaluation, not only to assess the ‘success’ of arts projects, but also to enhance the progress of a project, represent different participants’ experiences, disseminate good practice and learn from previous activities.

At the same time evaluation within the arts occupies a difficult territory. Whereas undertaking research in, with and through art practice is recognised and validated by practitioners<sup>1</sup>, it remains the case that all too frequently evaluation is seen as the uncreative, form-filling exercise conducted hastily at the end of an activity in order to satisfy external requirements. However, this limited view of evaluation fails to acknowledge that a broad range of techniques and theoretical approaches can be employed, which blur the boundaries between creativity and critical reflection and which serve to widen the scope of any evaluative exercise. From my experience as an artist and educator who has spent the last ten years researching participatory practice in galleries and other learning scenarios and examining interconnections between art making and pedagogy I have observed that best practice evaluation can enrich creative practice and participatory projects, enabling fresh insights and deeper engagement.

<sup>1</sup> The construction of art practice as research is a well-established phenomena. For instance researchers within visual arts and education have made general connections between art practice and research, in one instance suggesting that both are concerned with discovering the new (Varto, 2002). Likewise, Raney (2003) considers that ‘research’ has to a large extent replaced ‘expression’ as a model for art practice’ (Ibid, 2003: 5). In this configuration art’s rationale shifts away from the singular portrayal of the artist’s inner thoughts and emotions toward more cross-disciplinary and hybrid approaches involving artists investigating and articulating specific issues.

For this reason I consider it worthwhile to revisit evaluation models and explore how and why different methodologies operate. In this text I will give a brief overview of evaluation generally and consider varied approaches, with particular reference to specific projects. Whilst recognising that the great majority of evaluation approaches and techniques contribute to our understanding, I will focus in particular on methodologies that involve artists and participants engaging in ongoing critical reflection and self-assessment. This latter approach, I will argue, can be seen to mirror artistic practice itself and enhances the development of a project as well as providing essential evaluative data.

### 2. What is evaluation?

As will become evident, evaluation is more complex than would at first appear. Consequently it tends to be described in terms of what it can involve, rather than more narrowly defined in terms of what it is. For example, Felicity Woolf, in the publication ‘Partnership for learning: a guide to evaluating arts education projects’ (1999) avoids giving a specific definition at all and instead argues that evaluation is based on three key ideas:

- *Evaluation involves making judgements, based on evidence about the value and quality of a project.*
- *Evaluation is open and clear and involves all partners, including the people taking part.*
- *Evaluation helps with decision-making during a project and for future projects.*

(Woolf, 1999: 3)

These three features; judging quality, participation by all and the importance of the decision-making process in terms of informing future activity surface in evaluation initiatives across the arts. However, the extent to which each is present within individual evaluations varies significantly and is determined by wider issues including varying concepts of what constitutes ‘valid’ evidence, the position of the evaluator and the extent to which those involved consider it is possible or desirable to make

*objective» assessments of what has been called «the multiple complexities of empirical events».*

(Hooper-Greenhill, 2000:12)

Equally, the nature of the activities being interrogated and the purposes of the evaluation will, in turn, impact on the methods chosen and the reception given to findings. For example, as is evident in the projects described below, who determines the 'quality' of an activity (and for what end) is a central question that all evaluations need to make explicit, but is particularly important in programmes that aspire to empower participants. For this reason, it is useful to give some thought to what the purposes of evaluation might be.

### 3. The differing purposes of Evaluation.

Evaluations are conducted to gain knowledge and understanding about events and activities. Although each evaluation is clearly specific and unique, it is possible to recognise general perspectives in relation to aims and objectives. Three broad categories have been identified that provide a useful basis for further analysis:

- *Evaluation for accountability (e.g. the measurement of results or efficiency)*
- *Evaluation for knowledge (e.g. the acquisition of a more profound understanding in some specific area or field)*
- *Evaluation for development (e.g. the provision of evaluative help to strengthen organisations)*

(Chelimsky, 1997)

Each of these perspectives overlap and it is rare, particularly within the arts, that one is adopted exclusively. An exploration of each of these approaches in turn will assist in clarifying this.

#### EVALUATION FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

Evaluations that are primarily concerned to establish the results, efficiency or 'success' of a project can be classified under this approach. 'Success' in this context is commonly judged in terms of how well a project has conformed to and attained its original aims and ambitions, with emphasis usually on the results or outcomes, rather than on an examination of the processes involved. Generally, these evaluations are conducted to provide information to decision-makers, funders or policy makers, by an evaluator who is deemed to remain independent and tend to involve a greater reliance on quantitative analysis. This approach is allied to a belief that reality is objective and measurable and that the researcher is detached and value-free. For these reasons particularly, it is unusual for an evaluation of an arts project to concern itself with accountability issues only, although examples can be found which evidently draw upon this perspective.

The GLLAM (Group for large Local Authority Museums) Report «Museums and Social Inclusion» (2000) aimed, amongst other things, to identify the impact of museums and galleries in relation to social inclusion issues and to consider the nature of evaluation used within museums to date. Interestingly, the definition of evaluation given in the report is:

*An approach to data collection with a specific purpose - to determine the degree to which an exhibit or program matches some criteria for success. It is the systematic process of data collection and analysis, and the presentation of findings in the form of a report. [...] Assessment is another term that may be used as synonymous with evaluation.*

(Ibid, 2000: 61)

Both the terminology used and the focus on 'success' imply that an accountability approach was being advocated here - in the sense that, even though a range of data gathering methods (including interviews with museum staff, document analysis and site visits) were employed, the purpose of the evaluation was to provide an external assessment of the extent to which museums and galleries have a positive social impact, judged in terms of specific outcomes, such as a reduction in vandalism.

In relation to the report's ambitions, the authors acknowledge that museum and gallery users' perspectives were only included «in a limited way» (Ibid, 2000: 55). Furthermore, within an Appendix they admit that the museums participating faced problems analysing their data and summarising and presenting their findings, whilst finding it difficult to describe «a non-conventional and complex process (such as a community project) using a conventional report» (Ibid, 2000: 58). A 'conventional report' is not defined, but the writers advocate for sensitive and relevant approaches (including progressive data collection) to be used in the future. All of which suggests that inclusive and ongoing evaluation methods may be more appropriate to allow for nuanced and holistic understandings of such complicated and organic projects.

As practitioners know, the unpredictability and complexity of the processes inherent in the arts tend to prohibit easy measurement. Projects that explore new areas, by definition involve experimentation and it has been argued that any evaluation of aims and objectives is inappropriate, as the intention of art activity is to defy predictability and move away from what was originally intended (Kushner, 1989). Similarly, it has been recognised amongst social scientists, critical theorists and feminist researchers that researchers and practitioners cannot exist in a detached, objective state. Instead, it is essential to recognise inter-subjectivity within any project (Reason, 1988, Rogoff, 2004, Kirkup, 1986).

In light of these difficulties with the accountability model, there exists a second understanding of evaluation, which argues that, rather than judging the success of programme outcomes or performance, it should instead constitute a 'rendering' of a project from inception to close. Within this model the focus is on the construction and 'telling' of the story of the project and the sharing of experiences (Kushner, 2000). The emphasis shifts, therefore, towards an understanding, not only of what was accomplished during a project, but also what it meant to the participants. The making and articulation of meaning, significant as the desired outcome of participatory arts projects, takes on an additional relevance here. Evaluations of this nature can be identified as having a 'developmental' perspective.

However, prior to examining developmental evaluation I would like to highlight the importance of evaluation as a tool for drawing attention to good practice and ensuring that participatory arts projects exist beyond their actual realisation. The frequency of short-term project funding within the arts, combined with a tendency to put projects 'to one side' once they are complete, can render good work invisible to all but the immediate participants. Evaluation, therefore, can and should function to recognise, disseminate and promote positive activity as well as record and assess particular projects. Evaluations that are conducted primarily to generate understanding of particular issues and advance solutions to specific problems within a sector can be described as having a 'knowledge' perspective and I now turn to these.

#### EVALUATION FOR KNOWLEDGE

In some instances evaluations may be undertaken so as to learn about and explain what lies behind particular issues or activities. This form of evaluation is most likely to involve an in-depth cumulative enquiry into a particular sector and can involve both quantitative and qualitative research methods. In some respects, these evaluations are closest to research, in that the results are intended to be generalisable and may include some form of advocacy on behalf of the projects. The role of the evaluator within this category is flexible, depending on the evaluation design and methods.

One example of this approach is given by the «Learning Through Culture. The DFES Museums and Galleries Education Programme: A guide to good practice» report. Published in 2002, this report also demonstrates how evaluation can be used to gain understanding about a particular programme, in this instance to «raise awareness of the high potential that exists in museum and galleries for genuine and long-lasting learning and to show some of the ways in which this learning can be achieved» (Clarke et al, 2002: 4). The

report draws on 65 case studies, but also includes guidance for museums and galleries on establishing and maintaining successful projects. This report is clearly advocating the benefits of visiting galleries or museums, which would pose problems for some commentators, who have argued that by championing the activities under investigation so overtly, the evaluators have inevitably compromised their independence, if not their objectivity, particularly in relation to the funders of the evaluation (Scriven, 1997). In other words, it can read as a promotional document rather than an evaluation. However, others have argued that it is essential that evaluators adopt an advocacy role and that evaluation has an essential task:

*(a) To compensate for the marginal voice (usually young people), and (b) to correct biases in data generation which have historically tended to lean towards representing the voices of the powerful*

(Kushner, 2000: 43).

Whether or not a report such as Learning through Culture does give voice to the marginalised is debatable. However the study does provide a useful example of how effective evaluation can make a significant contribution to the development of future projects and inform government and major institutions' funding and policy decisions.

#### EVALUATION FOR DEVELOPMENT

The purpose of these evaluations is primarily for all involved to gain greater understanding of the processes and the results of a project, so as to inform and develop the practice. Evaluations that contribute at the planning stage of a project, that chart progress, attempt to understand what has occurred from a multitude of perspectives and, in some cases, to empower those involved in the evaluation can be classified under this approach (Chelimsky, 1997). Tending to rely on qualitative research methods, such evaluations adapt and change as the process moves forward. Here the relationship between the evaluator and the participants is required to be close, with the former providing support and guidance to the participants, rather than detached assessment.

Examples of this approach to evaluation within the arts are relatively common. Indeed Felicity Woolf appears to consider this the only approach to take, since she argues that the purposes of evaluation are to improve practice during and after the project – partly so that partners «like artists, group leaders and participants feel the evaluation is for their benefit and not just for funders» (Woolf, 1999: 7).

The contribution made by participants to an evaluation is critical, although it varies between projects. At one extreme, the process can rely almost wholly on the participant's self-assessing, so as to develop them-

selves and the project they are involved with. In which case the model described as Empowerment Evaluation is relevant, since in this context participants conduct their own ongoing analysis and reflection, with the outside evaluator acting as an advisor or 'critical friend' (Fetterman, 1997). These evaluations, which share characteristics with Action Research<sup>2</sup>, aim to be a dynamic and responsive process that produces understandings of a situation from the participant's own perspective. They are not intended primarily to assess a project's value, but be part of a process of development, hence:

*Participants learn to assess their own progress continually toward self-determined goals and reshape plans and strategies according to this assessment.*  
(Ibid, 1997: 32).

An example of this form of participant-centred evaluation is given by the «Young People, Digital Technology and Democratic Cultural Engagement: DIY Digital Learning Map Programme» conducted at The University of Central England in Birmingham and Jubilee Arts, West Bromwich.

This project initiated work in informal contexts with young people using digital technology, and aimed to be as inclusive as possible. The project developed methods to enable participants to reflect on their learning, identify their own value for the work they have made (and accredit it accordingly) and set goals for the future. Specific techniques included the keeping of project journals by the participants and the project leader, regular discussion groups and peer review sessions. Participants self-evaluated so as to have some control over the process of assessment, rather than have notions of 'quality', which they may not agree with, ascribed to their work (Hall, 2002).

Underpinning this initiative was the perception that critical reflection and ongoing evaluation were essential to the overall creative process. As the project coordinator Roz Hall stated:

*The creative process can be understood as an ongoing evaluative process, whereby artists make evaluative decisions with every mark made, rather than a process which might have evaluation imposed upon completion. The creative process is dependent upon ongoing evaluation as it informs the development of both the outcome and the process. Judgements of*

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<sup>2</sup> Action Research is a complex field which has been described as 'a form of disciplined enquiry, in which a personal attempt is made to understand, improve and reform practice' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000: 226). Involving individuals in a systematic programme of problem-setting, ongoing reflection and application within practice, Action Research is intended to enhance awareness and understanding whilst addressing the original problem. For an example of Action Research as applied to gallery education practice see Barbara Taylor (2006) 'en-quire: Learning through Action Research' in engage 18.

*quality (are) utilised by young people during a creative process [...] and are reflective of their unique and distinct cultural experiences.* (Ibid, 2002: 86)

In this case evaluation is inseparable from the project itself and becomes a crucial aspect of participants' overall development.

The centrality of critical reflection within artistic and participatory practice is made explicit through research centred on artists. For example, interviews with practitioners who had completed an Arts Council England 'Artists in Sites for Learning' project identified that these artists worked with the participants, not only to develop their individual creativity, as would be expected, but also to enable them to critically reflect on their progress (Pringle, 2002). Both these activities were perceived by artists as necessary for participants to realise their ideas in visual form. To give an example, one artist, describing the process of making a piece of work with a Deaf Awareness Group stated:

*What I was trying to do with the print-making, after it came through the press, was to stop and look at it and start to make qualitative judgements about that print. Do you like the fact that that's white and that's very dark and you could try it this way? So really trying to find out from them what they didn't like or did like about their own work and trying to develop that.*  
(Ibid, 2002: 36)

For some artists the development of an individual's evaluative skills was intended to move beyond the confines of the project, forming part of a more general process of learning and empowerment. Practitioners encouraged participants to question and articulate issues and concerns that had significance or relevance to them; «it's certainly about developing critical skills and they are fantastic life skills» (Ibid, 2002: 40) as one artist described it.

The research went on to identify that these artists worked in this way with participants because they perceived critical engagement to be integral to the creative process. Art making is about articulating issues and visual «problem -solving», using all the skills at an artist's disposal. One artist put it this way:

*How we work is to say this is how an artist works; you have the idea, you design it usually on paper or whatever and then it leads on to the main thing. You're making decisions and solving problems about visual art... it's problem solving if you like, of an idea to visualize it.*  
(Ibid, 2002: 33)

The educationalist Roy Prentice supports this view, describing artistic process as «reflective practice».

Drawing on the writings of the artist Ben Shahn, Prentice articulates how painting, for example, is both creative and responsive, requiring the artist to function as «two people not one – the producer and the critic» (Ibid, 1995: 126). Therefore:

*Central to such creative behaviour is a capacity to evaluate from within the activity that which evolves through the activity: the realization of intention in concrete form*

(Ibid, 1995: 126).

Recognising how and why artists employ qualitative judgements and reflective practice provides a basis for designing meaningful evaluation. Most notably the link between evaluation and the art making process would appear to strengthen the argument for employing this form of embedded, process-oriented, collaborative assessment within arts projects.

Participatory evaluation techniques were employed during the «Dis-assembly» project that was initiated by the Serpentine Gallery and which took the closure of North Westminster Community School in West London as the site of a series of artists' engagements. In 2005-6, as part of «Dis-Assembly», the artist Faisal Abdu'Allah worked with pupils to explore and document their responses to the school through a process of enquiry embedded in contemporary art practice. This process sought to empower young people to interrogate, reflect on and make explicit their experiences of a place in transition. It was crucial, therefore, that the evaluative process made a positive contribution, whilst identifying what working with Faisal had meant for all those (including the artist, teachers and students) involved.

To achieve this, a range of data capture techniques were employed that included journal keeping, video interviews, questionnaires and peer-led discussions in order to encourage everyone to consider what it means to critically reflect rather than simply being respondents to the evaluation (Pringle, 2006a). My role as evaluator was primarily to support the participants, prompting and questioning, rather than assessing, and in this way my activities mirrored those of the artist himself. As he questioned, encouraged, reconsidered, experimented and debated alongside the young people, I sought to encourage further reflexivity and meaning making. The majority of activities were simple and essentially involved students and other participants stopping at key moments during the project and focusing briefly on the following questions:

- What am I doing?
- How have I done it?
- Why have I done it?
- What would I like to do next?

The responses generated from these informed the future development of the project whilst providing an ongoing record of «Dis-Assembly's» progress.

The developmental approach produced in this case a wealth of insights into how the project was informed by and impacted on those who took part. For the artist, the process became a learning experience. «This has to be the most testing project I've ever done», he said part way through. «In twelve years of making work, this is the hardest. It's really stretching me. In order to develop as a practitioner you have to go beyond your comfort zone. Now I'm doing it» (Pringle, 2006: 86). This form of formalised reflective practice became part of his engagement with students during this project (and beyond), most overtly in the form of the project journal that he maintained. He saw the evaluation as the logical extension of his practice, not an intrusive and potentially disempowering activity imposed from outside.

For the young people and teachers the project allowed them to explore, consider and articulate their thoughts and ideas. There were indications also that engaging in the evaluation process encouraged participants to reflect on their practice in ways they would not have done otherwise. As one student acknowledged:

*It's important to document the process. Everyday before a session we try and write things down and after the session we discuss what we thought and did and talking to you (the researcher) is important.*

(Pringle, 2006a: 22)

Similarly working with the artists enabled the teachers to reconsider some of their approaches and it appeared that the evaluation informed their thinking about learning and teaching more broadly. One teacher admitted:

*I think that it is important that this evaluation is happening as I think it provides an opportunity to take something of what we have learnt through this project and apply it to education more generally. I think work like this could have a major impact on education.*

(Ibid. 2006a: 24)

Thus arguably the evaluation not only provided evidence of the project's 'success' in achieving its aims (in terms of empowering young people to interrogate, reflect on and make explicit their experiences) but in some respects contributed to it. In particular the methodology adopted gave participants time and a structured mechanism to examine what they were doing, ask themselves why and plan for the future.

However, one difficulty in adopting this approach remained; how was Dis-Assembly itself to be re-

presented to others? In practical terms the ongoing data capturing produced hours of video footage and recordings, significant amounts of diary entries and numerous detailed questionnaires. Attempts to synthesize and analyse this amount of data and provide a coherent report for stakeholders proved highly challenging. Inevitably a partial picture emerged and I was conscious of how whoever writes the final report is tasked with interpreting and representing knowledge generated through a collaborative experience. Reason has identified that the act of writing about others' experience serves to repossess that experience as an academic subject that can be studied from outside, hence removing it from the control of participants. In other words:

*One of the key questions about research is the political one; who owns the knowledge, and thus who can define the reality?*

(Ibid, 1998: 47)

Thus, particularly when there is pressure from (and on) project organisers and funders to document 'success', it is essential that evaluators, particularly those working in embedded and collaborative ways, retain a strong sense of responsibility to those they are representing. Guaranteeing that multiple voices are present in the final report, sharing findings with participants throughout and co-authorship can go some way to ensuring that projects that seek to empower participants do not withdraw control at a final critical moment.

### Conclusions and points for consideration

Evaluation is broader reaching and more involved than is normally recognised. Each of the three perspectives

outlined above represent different ways to think about evaluation, and to consider what the implications are in terms of the role of the evaluator, the chosen research methods and the status of the evaluation findings and conclusions. No one perspective is 'right' and, without exception the examples referenced here stress the greater need for any evaluation to be focused and thorough, whilst being appropriate to the arts activities in question.

In light of that it is useful to take the following into account when devising an evaluation strategy:

1. The nature of the project to be evaluated: number of participants, time span
2. The aims and objectives of the project to be evaluated
3. Who the evaluation is for and what their requirements are: funders, participants, policy makers, project organisers, all the above
4. What are the aims and objectives for the evaluation: to inform policy, to inform and develop practice, to celebrate achievements, to empower the participants
5. What the budget for evaluation is: when would the evaluation commence, who would undertake it, what resources can be made available for it?

Each of these approaches can be used in conjunction with each other. The important issue in ensuring that an evaluation is effective is to match the methodology and techniques to the nature and requirements of the activity, its supporters and its potential audience and to recognise that evaluation can contribute in positive ways to the project itself.

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