Evaluating Arts Education: Lessons from the Project Oracle London Arts Cohort

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1. Introduction

Considerable inquiry is taking place in the arts education sector to understand the value of the arts in young people's lives, both within and out of school. In autumn 2017, Project Oracle[1] brought together a cohort of 13 organisations working in arts education to participate in an intensive programme of evaluation support. This cohort built on the learning from a similar, but smaller cohort that was delivered in 2015-16. The key lessons from this first cohort can be found in the learning report Impact Pioneers: Lessons in Arts Evaluation (Project Oracle, 2016). The 2016 report highlights the power of working together in order to understand the impact of the arts and communicate that impact with a unified voice. In establishing a shared agenda around a common outcome, Project Oracle and the 2015-16 Arts Cohort participating organisations identified understanding the effect that the arts can have on young people's wellbeing as a priority area to explore.

For the 2017-18 London Arts Cohort, we built on that learning specifically by responding to the following needs identified in the 2016 report (p. 7):

- The need for more time and discussion to encourage meaningful alignment on key outcomes
- The need for shared understanding of evaluation and consistent terminology
- The need for increased evaluation capacity within organisations.

Project Oracle, now part of the Centre for Youth Impact, think the above needs also apply across youth provision more widely.

This is the final learning report for the London Arts Cohort. In this report, we discuss the key considerations that we believe organisations should reflect on when seeking to understand the impact their work has on wellbeing and what is required to speak with 'one voice' effectively. The report focuses on *learning about the approaches* to the evaluation of arts education that organisations taking part adopted rather than *the impact of arts education for young people*. It aims to be a practical resource for both delivery organisations and funders in the arts education sector.

[1] Project Oracle and The Centre for Youth Impact have since joined forces in order to have a more combined offer for the youth sector.

This report summarises the key lessons learnt from this programme of work in the following areas:

- Achieving meaningful alignment in evaluation across partners and stakeholders;
- Embedding a theory of change into practice;
- Using validated tools and standardised measures;
- Evaluating small group work;
- Measuring wellbeing.

1.1 About the London Arts Cohort

Arts education organisations were invited to apply for a tailored programme of support to improve the quantity and quality of their evidence of impact over the course of nine months. It was a requirement that all participating organisations had young people's 'improved wellbeing' as an outcome of interest and be committed to measuring it. The focus on arts education and wellbeing gave the group a common agenda, even though the individual projects were varied.

Organisations taking part in the cohort	
Awkward City	Element
Battersea Arts Centre	National Youth Theatre
Beyond the Classroom	Orchestras for All
Crafts Council	Theatre Peckham
Dulwich Picture Gallery	Unicorn Theatre
Eastside Educational Trust	Zoielogic Dance Theatre

Cohort participants had access to the support activities as shown on the timeline below. These activities respond to the needs identified in the 2016 learning report by enabling a two-way dialogue between arts organisations and funders, and also by increasing organisations' internal capacity to engage with evaluation in a meaningful way.

Activity	**Nov. 2017**	**Jan. 2018**	**Feb. 2018**	**March 2018**	**April 2018**	**May 2018**	**June 2018**	**April 2019**
Theory of Change training	■							
Evaluation Planning training			■					
Data Analysis with Excel training			■			■		
One-to-one support sessions		■	■	■	■	■	■	

Activity	Nov. 2017	Jan. 2018	Feb. 2018	March 2018	April 2018	May 2018	June 2018	April 2019
Evaluation placements								
Funder Roundtable								
Final Learning Event								

All of the activities above were designed to be accessible, relevant and practical for the organisations taking part. During the cohort, participating organisations chose one of their projects/programmes of work on which to focus their learning, though the skills and insight gained can be applied across an organisation.

Participants either created or refined theories of change and evaluation plans that met Standard 1 of the Project Oracle Standards of Evidence. The Standards of Evidence reflect claims that can be made about the effect of a project or programme of work, based on evidence from outcome and impact evaluation. The claims become stronger as the robustness of the methodology used in an evaluation increases. The standards are a useful scaffold for organisations to use when working to improve both their evaluation practice and the strength of their evidence. Standards 1 and 2 focus on developing behaviours that encourage organisations to meaningfully collect and learn from evidence. At Standard 1, a project is able communicate that they know what they want to achieve, and a high-quality theory of change and a meaningful evaluation plan are created. At Standard 2, a project is able to communicate where they have seen a change, and evidence for this claim is presented through a pre-and-post study, with an appropriate sample that shows a significant positive effect in at least one of the intended outcomes. Most youth organisations are working at or towards Standards 1 and 2. Organisations that already had a theory of change and evaluation plan in place worked towards Standard 2, with support from Evaluation Placements.

Placements were carried out by three students in the social sciences who were also passionate about improving outcomes for young people. The placements involved analysing existing data, as well as reviewing the participating organisations' evaluation processes and making recommendations for moving forward. The experience increased the analytical capacity of organisations and gave the students an opportunity to improve their evaluation skills.

2. Achieving meaningful alignment in evaluation

All organisations have both internal motivations to evaluate, such as to enable continuous quality improvement and better support the young people they work with, and external motivations, such as accountability and advocacy. Through the 2017-18 Arts Cohort activities, we worked with arts funders and delivery organisations together in response to the need for more meaningful alignment of motivations and expectations for evaluation across partners and stakeholders.

In order to move the evidence agenda forward, open and honest conversations between funders and delivery organisations are essential. The Funder Roundtable and the Learning Event provided the space for these conversations to occur. 'Aligning expectations between arts organisations and funders/commissioners' was an agenda item at the Funder Roundtable and the question 'who and what is all this evaluation for?' was posed as a table discussion topic the Learning Event.

Reflecting on their motivations for evaluating their practice, arts organisations at both events spoke about their desire to use evaluation to improve their offer and scale up activities. However, they also identified tensions where evidence required for reporting to funders isn't entirely aligned with organisational learning priorities. With limited time and resources, organisations are often in a position of having to choose one at the expense of the other. This is further complicated by the fact that many organisations are funded by multiple funders with varying priorities and reporting requirements.

> *"We sit between arts, education and social change and all of our projects are funded by different funders who are interested in different things. It can be difficult to manage the practicality of what we need to measure to report to our funders and what we're interested in."*
> Stuart Burns, Orchestras for All (Funder Roundtable)

It is not realistic to expect complete convergence of evaluation priorities between funders and delivery organisations – indeed, neither represents homogenous group anyway. However, funders and delivery organisations do have a shared agenda with respect to improving lives for young people and their communities, and promoting the arts a vehicle for positive change. Engaging funders in constructive dialogue, rather than being defensive or dismissive, opens the opportunity to find common ground and build on that to achieve alignment without requiring complete convergence. Funders who are interested in specific outcomes are also well positioned to facilitate this process of alignment and in turn have the potential to support a collective movement within a shared agenda. Both the 2015-16 and 2017-18 London Arts Cohorts showed an appetite for this.

Achieving meaningful alignment with stakeholders is essential in order for learning from evaluation to take place. Motivations and intended audience will shape how data is both elicited and reported and as such, these drivers should be routinely reflected on. It is unhelpful, and a

barrier to learning, when expectations are set too high for evaluation results or change in outcomes is the primary indicator of a project's success. Appendix 2 in the RSA's Learning About Culture Evidence Champions Guidebook (Londesborough et al, 2019, pp. 42-48) has useful guidance for having productive conversations about evaluation with various stakeholders.

Before undertaking any evaluation, we recommend that you consider these questions:

- What do we hope to learn and communicate with this evaluation?
- How will evaluation results be used to shape our offer moving forward?
- What are the implications of this evaluation, particularly if change isn't observed or results are unexpected or disappointing?

3. Embedding a theory of change into practice

A theory of change is a description of how and why change is expected to happen in a particular context. The term 'theory of change' refers to both the process of creating the description and the description itself, usually presented in a diagram. A theory of change sets out why you do what you do, alongside what exactly you're doing. It also sets out how you believe what you do influences change in the lives of individuals and communities. Creating a theory of change, and embedding it into practice, is widely considered the first step on a meaningful evaluation journey. Theories of change are meant to be dynamic living documents that are tested and refined over time as an organisation learns from its evidence.

All organisations on the Arts Cohort were supported through a process of planning and reflection to write a theory of change for their project. Having 'improved wellbeing' as a common outcome of interest meant that all organisation had to include it on their project's theory of change. On its own, a theory of change is not evidence of impact. Theories of change need to be tested with careful evaluation. The theories of change that were produced in the arts cohort set out the difference cohort members believe they can make, and their evaluation plans give them the tools to test these beliefs. In cases where organisations had already been collecting data against a theory of change, that data was used review and refine the theory of change based on what was learned.

> "*This [theory of change] is reflecting a cultural change. We're challenging real assumptions that we make and are moving towards a more impact-led narrative. We've always been funded and worked at the project level, not an impact level.*"
> Louise Perry, Chickenshed (Funder Roundtable)

Achieving organisational engagement with theory of change is important in order for it to be a useful tool. The process of creating one is intended to promote ownership of both practice and evaluation amongst practitioners. This process of deep reflection on practice can feel confronting. However, most organisations find it a hugely rewarding exercise because it enables them to consolidate knowledge and expertise about their work. It also enables organisation to focus their evaluation efforts on the most important areas of learning which they identify themselves.

> "*It [embedding a theory of change into practice] is successful when it leads to learning and encourages change and evolution.*"
> Note from Embedding a theory of change into practice table discussion at the Learning Event

Theories of change are often created through an iterative process. At the point when an organisation is satisfied that the diagram reflects their activities and a clear hypothesis, then an evaluation plan should be designed and implemented to test elements of the theory. After a cycle

of evaluation, the theory of change should be reviewed and refined in light of what was learnt as a result of the evaluation. Throughout the process, it is essential to maintain a genuine sense of curiosity rather than setting out to 'prove' that the theory was correct.

Recommendations for embedding a theory of change into practice:

- Involve as many stakeholders as possible in drafting the theory of change and embrace challenge and debate throughout the process
- Decide when it will be reviewed and remember that the diagram has not been etched in stone. It's expected to change as an organisation learns from its evidence
- Use it in regular reflective practice

4. Using validated tools and standardised measures

There are many benefits to using validated tools and/or standardised measures in your evaluation. Tools are judged on both their *validity* – they measure what they intend to – and *reliability* – able to get the same type of information consistently. Having been rigorously tried and tested, validated tools are more likely to be reliable and the data they yield credible. Not all standardised tools have been through this beneficial process of validation, though there are still some that are of a high quality.

Adopting commonly used, high-quality tools lays the foundation for a shared approach to evaluation. Using the same tools as others in a given sector creates the conditions for a collective approach enabling organisations to collect consistent, comparable data. This data can be compared between organisations as well as with established benchmarks, which allows organisations to put their results and learning into a wider context.

All of the organisations from the Arts Cohort were encouraged to incorporate a validated tool and/or standardised measure into their evaluation plans. The cohort were enthusiastic about this and some were already using them prior to engaging with the programme.

The validated tools and standardised measures chosen by the cohort were largely chosen to measure wellbeing, self-esteem and social and emotional skills. There are several tools freely available to measure these outcomes areas. Popular choices of tools among the cohort were the Life Effectiveness Questionnaire, Warwick Medical School's Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale, and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, all of which are questionnaires. While it is sometimes contested whether these outcomes can be meaningfully measured with a questionnaire, the process of academic validation that they have been through enables them to be considered both valid and reliable.

> "*Where you find validated tools that match the outcomes you're interested in, they help you become part of a bigger picture.*"
> Note from Using Validated Tools table discussion at the Learning Event

In practice, validated tools and standardised measures don't always feel like the best fit for collecting data from young people, particularly as they tend to be paper-based questionnaires, which many practitioners feel interrupts the flow of activities. Even so, with the variety of tools available to use and the advantages that they bring to evaluation practice, we recommend trying one that you can incorporate into your evaluation plan before writing your own bespoke tools. The Education Endowment Fund's Spectrum Database contains many useful examples.

While they hold many benefits, validated tools and standardised measures are not without limitations. Even with the cohort's enthusiasm to use these tools, some found it challenging to find

the right tool for the outcomes that they wished to measure, and at times felt it necessary to adapt existing tools. This should be done with caution. Modifying existing tools weakens their validity and also means they can't be aggregated with other datasets or compared against existing benchmarks.

Tools are validated as sets of questions, so before adapting tools, read the validation literature to understand how the questions relate to each other. Validated tools and standardised measures are often copyrighted so this also needs to be taken into account when considering modification.

> "*We've adapted validated tools and created some of our own scales. We know the risks and downsides to that, but we thought it was better to do that than measure things that were inappropriate or irrelevant to the young people and the project they're doing with us.*"
> Eloise Acland, Element (Funder Roundtable)

Recommendations for using validated tools and standardised measures:

- Adapt with caution and know that changes are highly likely to invalidate the tool. Understand how the questions relate to each other as a set and be careful not to violate the tool's copyright
- Only use them to understand the outcome they are validated to measure. Don't use them as proxies for another outcome even if they are related
- Make sure the purpose of the tool and how the data will be used are understood by both staff and young people.

5. Evaluating small group work

Working with small groups of young people offers both opportunities and challenges when it comes to evaluation. Much of the work with young people and the arts involves working with small groups. This was certainly true of the cohort and participants were supported to address some common concerns when it comes to evaluating projects with small groups.

In any evaluation it is important to find a balance between the use of quantitative and qualitive data, which are often referred to as "numbers" and "stories". When working with larger groups, practitioners can feel like they have to focus on numbers at the expense of stories. When working with small groups, the concern is the opposite – that the stories don't carry as much weight without numbers being used to support them. Additionally, when considering quantitative analysis, there are some important considerations to take when determining an analysis technique and communicating results.

There are many statistical tests that can be used to explore whether young people have experienced a change in outcomes between the beginning and end of a project. The number of young people in the data set (that is, those from whom you will gather data) will influence both how *likely* it is that a change can be detected and how *generalisable* the results could be. A statistically significant effect between pre- and post- measures (i.e. at the start and end of a project) may be seen in a small data set (less than 30 young people) when the effect size[2] is high and there is little variability within the data. From a purely statistical point of view, a limitation of small data sets is that in most cases one cannot make generalisable claims about discovered changes to the population as a whole. This has to do with the mechanics of statistical tests requiring normally distributed means, which can arise in larger samples, but are unlikely in smaller ones. Statistical confidence in generalisable claims increases with data sets greater than 30 and assertions about the results can be bolder. As such, the requirements to meet *Standard 2: we have seen a change* are for results to show a statistically significant effect in a data set of at least 30 young people.

Running statistical analysis with small data sets can still be interesting and meaningful. In cases where a larger data set is required, such as when an effect size is small and/or the data does not follow a normal distribution, one way to increase it is to collect data the same way with different cohorts and aggregate it together. Sample size calculators, such as this one freely available on the Creative Research Systems website, can help you determine how large of a data set will be needed to detect a statistically significant change with confidence. Qualitative data can also be used to support or challenge quantitative findings. As with all evaluation, being clear about learning

[2] 'Effect size' is a way of quantifying the difference between two groups or two different measurements with the same group. For further reading, the paper *Using Effect Size - of Why the P value* is not enough (Sullivan and Fein, 2012) discusses why the effect size is useful for understanding change in outcomes.

objectives for the evaluation and how results will be communicated will drive what approaches will be most appropriate.

In small group work settings, qualitative and creative methods can feel more attainable than when working with larger groups. Questionnaires require less time and resource to both administer and analyse than interviews, focus groups and creative methods, even though the latter are more closely aligned with practice. This is why, in most cases, the larger the group, the more likely the evaluation is to be a primarily quantitative study, with qualitative data used to bring the numbers to life by highlighting examples through a small set of case studies.

> "*Case studies are a good place to start and these can be used together with validated tools.*"
> Note from table discussion Evaluating Small Groups at the Learning Event

Carrying out an evaluation with a small group of young people opens the opportunity to do a more in-depth qualitative study, built on strong relationships and trust, which can be used alongside a quantitative study to triangulate[3] the results. Amma Mensah illustrates this in the following quote:

> "*There have been times when young people have presented as really outwardly confident, but their scores are the lowest in the group. It's useful to measure what you're doing, but also for getting to know who you're working with and how to support them. The baseline is just as important as the impact measurement.*"
> Amma Mensah, Beyond the Classroom (Funder Roundtable)

Recommendations for evaluating small group work:

- Triangulate data and be creative. Getting feedback from other adults, such as teachers and parents, can helpfully support or challenge the evidence you get from young people
- If you are collecting quantitative data, stick with it and use the same tools with different cohorts of young people. Data can then be aggregated to form a larger data set
- Be transparent about your group size and avoid reporting misleading percentage figures.

[3] Collecting data using more than one method to explore a single object of measurement in order to learn about it from different angles.

6. Measuring wellbeing

Wellbeing is multi-faceted and complex. As such, research and evaluation of people's wellbeing takes into account several aspects of a person's life including both objective measures (e.g. financial status and employment) and subjective measures (e.g. feelings of self-worth, life satisfaction and happiness). The latter are much more nuanced and difficult to measure. The Office for National Statistics collects data against the following measures to assess people's wellbeing on a national scale:

- personal wellbeing;
- physical health;
- employment, volunteering, education and skills;
- personal finance;
- social support;
- personal security;
- and sense of belonging.

It was a requirement of all organisations that were part of the London Arts Cohort to have young people's improved wellbeing as an outcome on their theory of change. This requirement, as well as the emphasis put on wellbeing in current funding trends, has surfaced an interesting tension. While young people's wellbeing is of high priority, measuring it in a meaningful way can be challenging and organisations should carefully articulate the extent to which improving a young person's wellbeing is in their sphere of influence, as it is unlikely that all factors will be addressed in any one organisation's offer. Among the cohort, all organisations listed 'improved wellbeing' as a *long-term* outcome or part of their overall aim. This is an acknowledgement of its complexity and shows an understanding that it isn't an outcome that is likely to change in the short term. Nevertheless, many organisations working with young people feel pressure to evidence that their work is having a positive effect on young people's wellbeing, even in short term projects.

There can be a temptation to oversimplify wellbeing as a construct and in turn overclaim a project's influence over it. This should be avoided. Wellbeing is an outcome that calls for careful reflection on motivations for measuring it. If the hope is to prove a demonstrable effect on young people's wellbeing, then that is likely to be an unrealistic expectation to put on a project-level evaluation as people are not likely to experience significant changes in their overall wellbeing in the short term or by addressing one factor of wellbeing. However, if measuring young people's wellbeing for evaluation also facilitates healthy reflection and dialogue between young people and practitioners, while providing insight that strengthens relationships, then it is worthwhile. As such, wellbeing data gathered through evaluation can serve as a way for practitioners to get to know the young people their working with and offer support according.

> "*Methods that are participant-focussed and encourage reflective practice give people the tools for self-reflection. These are for young people.*"

Note from the Measuring wellbeing table discussion at the Learning Event

Systematically measuring young people's wellbeing in community-based settings is an emerging practice. When considering measuring young people's wellbeing, it is important to have strong ethical and safeguarding procedures in place. Some wellbeing measures explore sensitive topics that young people may find distressing. Furthermore, worryingly low wellbeing scores may reflect a safeguarding concern that should be addressed.

For more information on arts for health and wellbeing, The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing summarised the evidence in their report Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing (2017). The What Works Centre for Wellbeing[4] has resources and discussion papers for measuring and understanding wellbeing.

Recommendations for measuring wellbeing:

- Clearly define what is meant by wellbeing. What aspects of wellbeing does your project or programme aim to influence and what aspects are beyond its sphere of influence?
- Use baseline data as an opportunity to get to know the young people you're working with. If they report low or worrying levels of wellbeing, then they could require more support than was initially planned for. If they are reporting normal-to-high levels of wellbeing at the start, their scores are unlikely to improve further, but you could then hope to see that those levels were maintained.
- Consider the ethical and safeguarding implications for measuring wellbeing. Ensure that you are prepared to respond to the full range of issues that young people could self-report or disclose through wellbeing tools or any distress that reflecting on sensitive issues could cause.

[4] www.whatworkswellbeing.org/about/about-the-centre/

7. Looking ahead

From our perspective, there is a lot to celebrate from the London Arts Cohort. Organisations that took part showed great enthusiasm for developing their evaluation practice. Through the London Arts Cohort, there is another set of organisations in the sector that have laid a solid foundation for carrying out meaningful evaluations of their work. We cannot overstate the importance of this step on the journey to generating interesting and meaningful evidence about the effects of arts education for young people's outcomes.

The enthusiasm of the cohort members to engage with careful and thoughtful evaluation was exciting and we are hopeful that in helping organisations lay a strong foundation for evaluation, we will see meaningful evidence produced, shared and learnt from moving forward.

The Centre for Youth Impact advocates for shared and collective approaches to evaluation. We would like to see this across youth provision and we will continue to support all stakeholders towards achieving that vision. We believe that following such approaches are a more efficient use of time and resources and encourage collaboration between organisations that are working towards similar goals. By measuring progress against a shared agenda, some of the barriers that keep organisations working in silos can be broken down and social issues can be tackled more systemically. While we are advocating for a shared approach to evaluation, we also believe that it is not realistic or helpful for organisations to aim for complete convergence in practice or evaluation. Organisations should identify common ground whether that be in practice, outcomes of interest, or crossover of participants, and build on that common ground to carry out collaborative evaluations. Networks that provide spaces where such collaboration can be nurtured include: RSA's Cultural Learning Evidence Champions Network[5]; Local Cultural Education Partnerships[6]; and the Centre for Youth Impact's Regional Impact Networks.[7]

Funders can also support collaboration by making connections across their grantees and encouraging those working towards the same outcomes to measure them consistently. Funders should share the learning from their funded projects' evaluations.

Finally, it is important to remember that the evidence journey is never 'finished'. No single evaluation can answer all the questions one may have about arts education and that's okay. Consequently, there's a need to maintain genuine curiosity. Success will be continuous learning and a healthy body of evidence is one that is dynamic and evolves with new insight.

[5] www.thersa.org/action-and-research/rsa-projects/creative-learning-and-development-folder/learning-about-culture/evidence-champions

[6] www.artscouncil.org.uk/children-and-young-people/working-partnership

[7] www.youthimpact.uk/regional.html

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The Centre for Youth Impact is a community of organisations that work together to progress thinking and practice around impact measurement in youth work and services for young people. Our vision is for all young people to have access to high quality programmes and services that improve their life chances, by enabling embedded approaches to impact measurement that directly inform practice. Our work is dedicated to three objectives, together with our expanded networks and other organisations from across the youth sector: curating the debate, building the movement and shaping the future.

Find out more about the Centre for Youth Impact at www.youthimpact.uk and follow us on @YouthImpactUK.

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