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Bridging the gap: Towards a framework for evaluating arts and health

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Abstract

The Disseminate Project is a research and publishing initiative in response to a need for evaluation of the effectiveness of community-based arts programs' impact on health. Disseminate is a three-way partnership between Disability in the Arts Disadvantage in the Arts Australia (DADAA), the Rio Tinto Western Australia Future Fund and Healthway through the Health Promotion Evaluation Unit at the University of Western Australia. The project aims to engage in advocacy, provide resources for practitioners in the sector, promote debate amongst practitioners and academics, and provide a forum for the voices of the participants.

A specific goal of Disseminate is to develop a broad evaluation framework to measure the impact of a wide variety of community arts programs, while focusing on the practical evaluation of several programs run by DADAA. This article discusses the use of prolonged formative evaluation as a strategy to identify intended and unintended outcomes, enabling the evaluation to be more responsive and effective as the community arts program evolves and becomes more predictable.

Keywords

Arts and health; evaluation; community arts; disability; regional; ageing; mental health.

1. Introduction

For people who engage in arts-related activity, there is often a resulting sense of wellbeing that is difficult to explain or quantify. When asked about their experiences, it is common for people to express a combination of physical, social, emotional and spiritual outcomes. While it may be evident to those involved in the arts that art engagement has health benefits, there is good reason to measure and understand more precisely how and why these benefits occur (Rosenberg, 2008).

Participatory community arts may be described as trying to do two things at once: provide individual therapeutic benefits of participating in arts activity and generate collective creativity in building social capital. The mechanism for collecting these outcomes and attributing them to the program is in its infancy with evaluation not yet central to arts for health practice (White, 2006). The significant challenge of deriving appropriate evidence for the health effects of arts engagement on participation across a wide range of health issues has resulted in the investigation of new ways to assess community arts interventions.

The Disseminate Project, an initiative of Disability in the Arts Disadvantage in the Arts Australia (DADAA) aims to respond to the gap in evidence and the need for effective frameworks to measure the outcomes and impacts of community cultural development interventions. Over seven years, Disseminate will test the use of formative evaluation in a number of different communities and for a number of different target groups, including: mental health; regional and remote communities; and ageing and disability.

2. Evaluation of cultural community development

Traditionally, art has not been measured using the same methods as conventional health interventions. Attempting to simply apply health research or evaluation techniques to art is unlikely to provide the right evidence to make a judgment on an art program's health effects. Rather, the project evaluation may actually distort the true picture, deflect attention away from the more significant areas of impact or miss the complexity of the experience (Selwood, 2002; Wavell, Baxter, Johnson & Williams, 2002).

Borrowing from the field of health promotion evaluation, Disseminate is partway through developing a pragmatic approach to some of the current challenges of evaluation outlined above in an effort to capture a more accurate picture of the impacts of community-based arts programs.

Given the relative novelty of evaluating arts and health, and the complexity of the intervention, it makes sense to approach the task cautiously, and begin with

exploratory —or formative— stages of evaluation before proceeding with formal evaluation. Our goal is to show that proceeding cautiously can help to better determine exactly what to evaluate in a program, and reveal what we don't know about how exactly art works in promoting well being and social inclusion. The end result of Disseminate is a framework that allows for traditional evaluation evidence to blend with predictable and unpredictable outcomes of engagement in the arts.

3. Formative evaluation

Formative evaluation is traditionally used to test materials prior to the start of a program. Typically, in measuring change in participants, a baseline measurement would occur with the first group of participants who enroll in a program. However, in many cases, programs require a settling-in period, where mechanisms for delivery are refined and materials modified. Extending the formative stage of a program acknowledges that new programs need to become established before they are evaluated and encourages modifying the program without reducing the ability to evaluate the program (Rosenberg, 2008).

An extended formative stage enables assessment of the reach of the program into the target population, and a better understanding of exactly how a program is being implemented. Perhaps most importantly, formative evaluation provides an exploration of a wide range of consequences of a program that are so often missed in the haste to deliver programs or proceed with formal evaluation. Revealing intermediary effects or unintended consequences are invaluable in ensuring the evaluation has the best chance of detecting changes related to the program, and therefore developing appropriate evaluation methods.

4. DADAA regional arts and health programs

DADAA has developed a regional arts and health program in the City of Bunbury, located in the South West of Western Australia. This is in partnership with the City of Bunbury, Advocacy South West and Bunbury Regional Arts Galleries. As a community cultural development program, the primary goal is to promote social inclusion for people with intellectual disabilities in the City of Bunbury.

One of the projects entitled 'About Face' comprises a series of visual arts workshops and is held at the local Stirling Street Arts Centre. It is attended by people with intellectual disabilities and facilitated by an artist, arts workers and volunteers from the community.



Self portrait in watercolour pencils by Cameron O'Brien, completed during the 'About Face' painting workshops in 2007

Another project called 'Bridging the Gap' is a public sculpture project that brings together people with intellectual disabilities and retired railway workers to develop a public sculpture for the City. The railway theme of the sculpture recognises the important social and economic role played by the railways in Bunbury over the past decades. 'Bridging the Gap' has consisted of a series of workshops, with local artists facilitating the design and construction of the sculpture, which will be unveiled in October 2009.

These two regional projects in Bunbury have presented a feasible opportunity to test formative evaluation. The project is a new one and, as such, much is unknown about how it has been implemented, about possible unintended outcomes and stakeholder satisfaction. Capturing more accurately some of the unknown experiences of participants and stakeholders will allow us, ultimately, to conduct a more accurate evaluation, using traditional methods.

5. Testing formative evaluation methodology

The multi-method evaluation framework shown in Table 1 illustrates the evaluation matrix for the evaluation of the Bunbury regional projects. It is adapted from *Evaluating Community Arts & Community Well Being: An Evaluation Guide for Community Arts Practitioners* developed by Arts Victoria & VicHealth, Victoria's Health Promotion Foundation (Keating, 2002).

The framework combines the traditional systematic approach to evaluation, which includes process evaluation of program activity implementation, impact evaluation of program short-term objectives and outcome evaluation of long-term aim and sustainability of the program. This is combined with the key stakeholder levels of participant, organisation and community, all of which are relevant for cultural community development projects (O'Connor-Fleming & Parker, 2001; Keating 2002).

In the current evaluation of our projects, we have added the formative evaluation component to the matrix. This includes semi-structured interviews, which involves asking participants, including facilitators and artists broad experiential questions about their involvement.

Table 1— Evaluation framework

	Participants	Organisation	Community
Formative	Semi-structured interviews	Semi-structured interviews	
Process		Survey to explore relationships between partners	
Impact			Survey to measure public perception of art and/or disability
Outcome	ARTS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE		

Some examples of formative semi-structured interview questions asked are:

- *Tell me about your experience in the arts project?*
- *What do you tell your friends and family about the project?*
- *Are there any positive or negative experiences you did not expect from being involved in the arts project?*
- *Can you describe one memory you think you will keep from your experience in the project?*
- *If you were asked to measure the success of the project, what types of things would you measure and report?*

While formative evaluation is open ended, flexible and explorative by nature, impact evaluation is determined by a predicted participatory effect. Key evaluation indicators are based on prior experience, practice and evidence. Community arts participation effects cited in the literature includes individual changes such as increased confidence, self esteem, motivation and skill development; and social impacts such as improved social networks, community engagement, awareness raising and social cohesiveness (Matarasso, 1997; Williams, 1997; Berkman & Kawachi, 2000; HAD, 2000; Jermyn, 2001; VicHealth, 2003; Wilkinson & Marmot, 2003; Staricoff, 2004; Secker, Spandler, Hacking, Kent & Shenton, 2007).

As shown in Table 1, we have developed process and impact surveys as part of our evaluation framework, based on these known outcomes. By comparing formative, process and impact evaluation results, we will discover if we have captured the vast impacts of DADAA regional programs, or if there is a need to develop more sensitive evaluation tools.

6. Results

Formative evaluation allows changes to be made during the course of the program or the settling-in period. This has certainly been the case for the Bunbury regional projects, where evaluation and project plans have required tweaking despite all best intentions.

For example, the extension of timeline for completion of the public art sculpture for 'Bridging the Gap' by twelve months due to increased construction costs and artist availability has changed the timing of the evaluation plan. Preliminary interviews with the 'About Face' participants with an intellectual disability reveal a challenge in recall and contextual analysis of arts participation, therefore requiring a different approach or medium to measure impact for some participants with an intellectual disability.

However, the most revealing aspect of the formative evaluation so far has been responses to qualitative interview questions by the artists and facilitators. The interviews conducted were transcribed into a verbatim transcript, read and then chunked into thematic statements. The four main themes include:

- Acceptance of people with disabilities in the local arts community with artists being inspired and, in turn, reviewing their practice;
- Appreciation and admiration of the participants with disabilities' abstract art skills and the freedom in their arts practice;
- Artists and art workers questioning the true value of art; and
- Artists and volunteers changing their attitudes about disability.

Some examples of these responses include:

'The positives were, just watching the participants and the change in them. And what they brought to our work, throwing caution to the wind and just being in the moment and going for it.' Artist

'It's about the (creative) breakthroughs; people being able to get beyond a certain stage with their work ...not conforming...but purely how they see it. That's inspirational for me and that's what I tell my friends. It's a privilege to see how someone else perceives the world and how their imagination works.' Artist

'How many opportunities do people have to be referred to as artists, but also to be part of an exhibition? You've only got to go to one ...you can't help but be pulled into the enthusiasm. The pure joy...it makes you think about the real value of art.' Arts worker

'It's been very educational for me. I must say I've learnt a lot more from it than I've put in. It's been marvellous to know how to approach people (with disabilities), because when we first started we were nervous'. Volunteer

'Those Fridays we spent working with everyone, were a bit stressful to get ready for, but being the last day of the week, it (became) something to look forward to. Having lots of time to spend with people (with disabilities) was a revelation to me. I didn't think I'd be into it at all, but it was lovely seeing how different people view the world, and how different it can be.' Artist

These responses represent intended outcomes, such as changing attitudes about disability and art skill development, but also unintended consequences, particularly in the artists and volunteers themselves. These results may not have been picked up by traditional methods of evaluation. Further evaluation of DADAA programs will continue to test this hypothesis, as the Disseminate Project continues.

7. Conclusion

The Disseminate Project attempts to mix the need to deliver community arts programs to people with disabilities and disadvantage within an evaluation framework that is flexible enough to capture a wide range of outcomes. The challenges of evaluating community arts programs may stem in part from an attitude that traditional evaluations may fail to capture the essence of arts engagement and at best might capture some of the outcomes. Through extending the formative stage of projects like 'About Face' and 'Bridging the Gap' there is an opportunity to embrace feedback from participants and other stakeholders in the development of appropriate evaluation objectives and methods.

The evaluation frameworks discussed in this paper provide opportunities to become flexible and detach from the rigorous medically derived positivist paradigm. Evaluating the wide effects of community arts programs may become more in tune with artists, evaluators and community participants.

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