

## **Do community-based arts projects result in social gains? A review of literature.**

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### ***Abstract***

*Arts projects* have become an important part of *community development strategies*. In addition to any creative achievements, projects are expected to have positive and measurable impacts on local social capital. Evidence for this is routinely demanded by funding organisations, and formal *evaluations* of projects have become a condition of investment. However, quantifying the impact of the arts in terms of *social gain* presents considerable difficulties, arguably greater than in any other field of evaluation. These problems are not just methodological. They also raise the question of the extent to which creative processes can - or should - be managed and controlled. This paper discusses these issues and reviews evaluations of *community based arts programmes*.

## ***The value of the arts to community development***

Cultural and artistic programmes have played an increasingly prominent role in urban regeneration initiatives in the United Kingdom since the mid-1980's (Landry and Matarasso, 1996; Braden and Mayo, 1999). While a national policy on impact evaluation in the arts is not yet a reality (Shaw, 1999), in community development work, a *quid pro quo* is increasingly expected as a condition for investment. Where arts programmes benefit from statutory funding, outcomes expected are frequently linked to social gain (National Foundation for Educational Research, 2000; Department of Health, 2001). The UK government's Social Exclusion Unit has reported on the role of arts, sport and leisure. A key finding was that supporting participation in arts and sport can aid neighbourhood renewal through improved performance on indicators of health, crime, employment and education (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 1999). Within this context, an emphasis on robust evaluation as a condition of funding has developed, particularly in exploring the extent to which arts investment is directed at specific populations held to be in need (Arts Council for England, 2000; Jermyn, 2001). In other words, community development programmes that utilise the arts must assure investors that they can add value by achieving measurable outcomes associated with social gain.

Barnardo's, the UK's largest children's charity, is evaluating the impact of a creative arts programme aimed at socially excluded youth, which has been developed in partnership by the Royal National Theatre and the London boroughs of Lewisham and Greenwich funded through SRB6. Targeting young people aged seven to 26 from areas of high deprivation, its objectives are to improve employment and educational prospects, promote sustainable regeneration and reduce social exclusion (Royal National Theatre 2000). As part of this process of evaluation, a literature review was undertaken to explore the extent to which community based arts projects have achieved identifiable social gains.

## ***Review parameters***

The search parameters were identified at the outset. The review addressed the question:

Do community arts projects contribute to positive social and economic change at a local level?

Arts projects were understood as interventions which feature professional artists, art education practitioners, teachers and animateurs. The review set out to include evaluations of such projects both in the UK and elsewhere that were:

- community based,
- carried out over a minimum 6 month period,
- intended to facilitate social and economic change.

Inclusion criteria were that evaluations:

- were clear about the methodology used,
- featured either a control group, or drew on multiple sources of data, for example opinions of volunteers or other observers as well as participants.

The following databases were searched:

- Applied Social Science Index and Abstracts (1987 – present)
- International Bibliography of Social Sciences (1981 – present)
- Sociological Abstracts (1963 – present)
- Educational Resources Information Centre (ERIC: 1966 – present).
- Searches were conducted for documents where the title or abstract contained the terms 'community development', and 'art', 'theatre', 'drama', 'music', 'dance', 'video', or 'film'. Hand searching was also carried out in the Arts Council for England library in Westminster.

## ***The challenge of evaluating the arts***

Over zealous pursuit of scientific objectivity and the internal validity of evaluation programmes are inappropriate and unhelpful approaches to the evaluation of social programmes and especially arts projects (Matarasso, 1996a:24).

Applying the principles of evaluation widely accepted in the field of health and social care to the arts raises a number of difficulties (Matarasso, 1997, Coalter, 2001). While empirical approaches are common in the field of education and the arts (for example, Wolff, 1978; Hanshumaker, 1980; Kardash and Wright, 1987; Luftig, 1995; Haanstra, 1996; Rauscher *et al.*, 1997; Sharp, 1998; Harland *et al.*, 2000), community-based arts projects present particular challenges because of the typically large numbers of stakeholders and the multiplicity of possible outcomes (Landry *et al.*, 1995). Experimental models of research - which compare individuals or groups who have received an intervention with those who have not - are often impractical, partly because of the level of complexity, and partly because of the extreme dissonance that often exists between demands for numerical accuracy and artistic temperaments.

While many evaluations of community based arts projects suggest positive benefits to participants (mostly through post-scheme self reports), some reported outcomes for stakeholders - such as subsequent uptake of training or employment – cannot be attributed to the intervention with any degree of certainty. Many studies report high levels of satisfaction without presenting evaluative data (for example, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1989; Galloway, 1995; Chelliah, 1999). Comedia, a research-based consultancy company have produced an extremely useful series of papers that are working towards a methodology for assessing the social impact of the arts (Landry *et al.*, 1995; 1996a; Lingayah *et al.*, 1996; Matarasso and Halls, 1996; Williams, 1997). However, Policy Action Team 10 reported that there was insufficient hard data on the regenerative impact of the arts and recommended that all bodies involved in using arts and sport as a medium for community regeneration should:

"wherever possible make external evaluation and the means to carry it out integral to the funded project/programme and ensure that the criteria against which success will be judged are clearly established and derived directly from the expressed needs and aims of those participating" (Department of Culture, Media and the Arts, 1999:9)

## ***The impact of the arts***

Encounters with the creative arts are frequently described in terms closer to epiphany than to a simple learning experience. We must clearly be careful here - many young people may experience a similar transformation during encounters with the natural sciences - but a special place is often claimed for the arts in terms of a capacity to break down barriers (Weitz, 1996; Lowe, 2000). More prosaically however, the impacts of the arts are often described in terms of their effects on personal, communal and economic factors. In 1988, Myerscough's study of the economic importance of the arts identified the sector to be a major contributor to productive employment and prosperity in Britain. However, since the evolution of the community arts movement in the late sixties, it has been widely argued that the economic benefits of arts activity are only part of the picture. Alongside educational benefits, arts interventions are increasingly credited with enhancing social capital (Williams, 1997), a process which establishes networks, mutual trust and co-operation within communities for the benefit of all (Kay, 2000; Kay and Watt, 2000).

## ***Results reported by key studies***

A number of evaluations, despite being useful on a number of levels, were excluded from this review because they did not include an adequate description of their methodology (Kamarck, 1971; Battram and Segal, 1987; Whitfield, 1991; Community Development Foundation, 1992; Shaw, 1992; Clinton, 1993; Hamblen, 1993; Harland *et al.*, 1995; Landry *et al.*, 1996; Carpenter, 1999; Dwelly, 2001) and did not evaluate a specific intervention or set of interventions. The following studies were judged to be the most robust and reliable, using the methodological criteria chosen.

Table 1 below summarises the findings from the eligible studies on the impacts of community-based arts programmes.

**Table 1 - Community arts project evaluations**

Authors	Methods	Outcomes
Jones, B. (1988)	<p>Interviews (n=20) with public officials, school officials, art council members, local and resident artists. Semi-structured format, before and after.</p> <p>Random surveys of households (pre-residency n=24 and post-residency n=47).</p> <p>Informal public interviews (n=16).</p> <p>Direct observations.</p> <p>Monitoring local newspaper.</p>	<p>Pilot by state arts agency. Aimed to establish whether community arts results in the development of community activities.</p> <p><i>Four outcome areas examined:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ enhancement of awareness and appreciation of cultural heritage and symbols.</li> <li>▪ Increase in sense of community</li> <li>▪ identification with the community</li> <li>▪ participation in community affairs</li> </ul> <p><i>Positive impacts identified by all:</i></p> <p>Change agent – the resident artist e.g. developed strong personal relationships, developed artistic techniques.</p> <p>Change agent system – SE Colorado Arts Council, e.g. increased and changed capacities, learnt about community and increased stature in community.</p> <p>Action system – local arts community, e.g. increased arts exposure leading to increased support for, and participation in, the arts.</p> <p>Client system and target system (community at large) e.g. diverse groups, given chance to work together such as business, social services and arts, collective action, enhanced sense of community and capacity-building.</p> <p>In a post-residency survey 3/5 respondents wanted to see the project continued, 75% of short questionnaire respondents felt the project was a good idea and 2/3rds said it should be done again.</p> <p>17% of pre-residency respondents thought they would participate, 49% of post-</p>

		<p>residency respondents had taken part. However, participation was greatest among the higher social classes, with participation among Chicanos, renters and newcomers minimal.</p> <p>Locality was seen as important with local artists doing the work, employing local themes, for a local audience.</p>
Matarasso, F. (1996b)	<p>Focused on three Fèisean (Gaelic festivals), but included several others. Interviews with fèis organisers, volunteers, participants, performers, local residents, visitors, etc. Questionnaire completed by 242 adults and children. Written submissions. Observation.</p>	<p><i>Social outcomes:</i></p> <p>Individual and personal development: 78% reported that they felt more confident and 79% said they had developed new skills.</p> <p>Social cohesion: 96% made new friends, often from different regions, age groups and social backgrounds.</p> <p>Community empowerment and self-determination: 41% of respondents keen to help in local projects. Brings together dispersed communities and helps them to acquire organisational skills.</p> <p>Local image and identity: Young people expressed newly positive feelings about the area, Highland culture and the Gaelic language.</p> <p>Imagination and vision: 93% feel that fèisean are of significance to people's sense of creativity.</p> <p>Health and well being: 43% said that they felt better or healthier as a result. 80% felt happier.</p> <p><i>Economic outcomes:</i></p> <p>Creation of at least 10 full time jobs in a context which is locally sensitive and sustainable.</p> <p><i>Negative outcomes:</i></p> <p>7% of children and 22% said attending had had a negative impact for them, the majority relating to minor aspects of physical well being.</p>
Matarasso, F. (1997)	<p>Reviews findings of studies in U.K. (8) and U.S. (2) sites.</p>	<p><i>Personal development</i> - 84% felt more confident, 37% took up training courses, 80% learnt new skills</p>

	Findings based on self reports.	<p><i>Social cohesion</i>- 91% made new friends, 54% learnt about other people's cultures, 84% became interested in something new.</p> <p><i>Community empowerment</i> - 86% wanted to be involved in new projects, 21% had new sense of their rights.</p> <p><i>Local identity</i> - 40% felt more positive about where they live, 63% were keen to help local projects.</p> <p><i>Imagination and vision</i> - 86% tried new things, 49% said taking part have changed their ideas, 81% enjoyed the creativity</p> <p><i>Health/well being</i> - 52% felt better or healthier, 73% reported being happier.</p>
Williams, D. (1997 )	Survey of community participants (n=109) in 89 public funded community based arts projects plus community members (n=123).	<p><i>Economic outcomes</i>: 45% of respondents felt projects had generated employment; 56% that they increased audiences for art work; 61% that they attracted further resources for community projects.</p> <p><i>Social outcomes</i>: Respondents to survey: 95% reported improved communication skills; 80% improved understanding of different cultures or lifestyles; 64% improved consultation between government and community; 90% better community identity and 86% reduced isolation; 77% improved recreational options; 48% development of local enterprise; 90% raised public awareness of an issue 57% actual action on a social issue.</p>
Matarasso, F. (1998)	Interviews, discussions & questionnaires with participants, staff, teachers, volunteers and artists; teacher assessment; written documentation from community arts projects. Participants included pupils in over 30 schools, over 100 children in playschemes and over 3000 people who	<p><i>Educational outcomes</i>:</p> <p>Teacher assessment of random sample of 119 primary pupils: 86% improved language skills, 84% improved physical co-ordination; 85% improved observation skills; 92% better creativity and imagination; 78% improved social skills. Half of participating adults felt they had acquired new skills.</p> <p><i>Social outcomes</i>:</p> <p>Participants: almost all said they had made new friendships.</p> <p>Researchers reported that projects:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Provided a focus for bringing different groups of people together to participate in community</li> </ul>

	attended an exhibition celebrating ethnic diversity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Facilitated some new contacts and co-operation between community groups (though some doubt how to how far this reached the city's white community)</li> <li>▪ Built community organisational capacity</li> <li>▪ Facilitated consultation between local authority and residents</li> </ul> <p>Problems in evaluation were noted: [some projects] <i>'were seen by participants to have contributing to improving understanding of marginalised groups...but the impact on its audiences of such 'mind changing' art work.. resists formal measurement'</i> (Matarasso 1998:35)</p>
Matarasso, F. with Chell, J. (1998)	<p>Telephone interviews with local arts organisations (n=53) at beginning and end of 18 month period.</p> <p>Questionnaires to participants (n = 100).</p> <p>Six discussion groups with funders, artists and participants.</p> <p>Written documentation from projects.</p>	<p><i>Economic outcomes:</i> 125% increase in number of new jobs created in projects; 18% increase in average number of people reporting finding work through projects.</p> <p><i>Participants:</i> 53% of participants started training since project and 20% felt new skills had helped get work</p> <p>In discussion groups: 69% felt it encouraged people to take up training; 46% knew of cases where participants had gone on to get jobs; but 22% felt project had not supported local businesses.</p> <p><i>Social outcomes:</i></p> <p>Participants: 88% said they'd developed new friendships; 64% reported gaining understanding of other people's cultures;; but 76% felt project made no difference to how they felt about their neighbourhood</p> <p><i>In discussion groups:</i> 81% felt projects raised awareness of community issues; 75% felt projects increased cross community co-operation; but 23% felt local public facilities had not improved; and 23% described no impact on crime or fear of crime; funders especially expressed concerns about sustainability.</p>
Kay and Watt (2000)	Stakeholders in four community arts projects in both rural and urban settings consulted using interviews,	Researchers reported that arts projects can make a substantial contribution to regeneration when part of an integrated programme.

	discussion groups or questionnaires.	
Lowe, S. (2000)	Observation, focus groups and evaluation reports with participants and artists in two community arts projects (n=100)	<p><i>Researcher reports:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Reduced isolation and increased sense of 'neighbourhood identity' via new relationships and support networks between participants.</li> <li>▪ collective expression of cultural heritage and sense of 'place'.</li> <li>▪ common community concerns identified.</li> </ul>

## Summary

As noted above, conducting robust evaluations of community arts projects present considerable methodological challenges. Self-reports by participants of perceived changes to relatively intangible (though extremely important) environmental factors such as the quality of public services or community co-operation lack evidential weight when judged by conventional standards. Furthermore, the studies we examined largely failed to meet the most demanding methodological criteria, being unclear for example, how the study populations were sampled, how respondents' views were measured, how many were lost to attrition, or making substantial claims of success in some areas without corroborating evidence, such as claims of better health. However, these criticisms are commonplace to the evaluation of many community based interventions, and in relative terms, we encountered many well structured and ambitious attempts to map change in highly complex situations. As can be seen from the above summary, self-reports of positive change were common across the majority of studies and in the majority of areas examined.

These included:

- *Personal change* - making new friends, being happier, more creative and confident, a reduced sense of isolation, more people taking up training (Matarasso, 1996b; Matarasso 1997; Williams, 1997; Matarasso, 1998).
- *Social change* - more cross-cultural community understanding, stronger sense of 'locality', bringing different groups together, improvement in organisational skills (Matarasso, 1996b; Matarasso, 1997; Williams, 1997; Jones, 1988; Matarasso, 1998; Kay and Watt, 2000; Lowe, 2000)
- *Economic change* - impact on number of new jobs and people finding work, improved image of community helping inward investment, increased sales of art work and more investment in arts programmes (Matarasso, 1996b; Matarasso, 1997; Williams, 1997; Matarasso with Chell, 1998; Kay and Watt, 2000).
- *Educational change* - some evidence of improved school performance (Matarasso, 1998).

Few unintended negative consequences were mentioned, the exception being some minor complaints from children about tiredness after some events (Matarasso, 1996b). Some areas seemed less affected than others, according to respondents' reports - fear of crime and local facilities in general were examples given - but this may also be taken as a warning to arts projects not to unreasonably raise expectations about what any programme, however well resourced, planned and executed, can achieve in isolation. There were also some reservations expressed about to what extent all sections of a community are reached by community based arts programmes (Jones, 1988). However, the overall verdict on the evaluations we reviewed was highly positive, according to the reports of the people who took part.

## Conclusion

The methods and the emotional dispositions of artists and evaluators frequently lie at very different poles. Artists may resist, even revile, classification and quantification, perceiving such approaches as hostile to the creative process (Moriarty, 1997). Evaluators engage with these issues as part of their trade. While attempting to retain as robust an approach as possible to the question of what constitutes sound evidence, we were sensitive to the particular difficulties of applying the evaluative principles widely accepted in health and social care to artistic ventures. Both the outcomes expected as a condition of scheme funding, and the general principles of sound evaluation require attention to be paid to measurable factors. However, we are familiar with the critique of positivism contained within Blake's 'mind-forged manacles' (a phrase not infrequently encountered in the literature we examined), and have taken note of the following warning:

It would be ironic if just as researchers and practitioners in other fields (such as health or organisational developments) are confidently expressing their appreciation of the limitations and fallibilities of scientific models of evaluation and moving to the language of narrative and metaphor, artists were to be terrified into the belief that information has to be translated into numbers to have any validity...shared learning can be rooted in emotions and passions as well as facts and figures, in visions and dreams as well as historical experience (Moriarty, 1997:11).

While the issue of transferability of learning is a legitimate research question, we can understand the frustration felt by artists and arts administrators when it is proposed that artistic experiences should be justified by their contribution to other fields of learning, and similarly justified for communities on the basis of their having a positive effect on wider social problems (Health Development Agency, 2000). We have no doubt that the outcomes of publicly funded arts projects can and should be subjected to robust evaluation, and such evaluations must rely on more than anecdotal evidence. If arts programmes claim - or are put in a position of having to claim through funding criteria - that participation will lead to, for example, improvements in health, reduction in youth crime, increased employment prospects or economic renewal, then such claims should be tested. This is by no means an impossible task. Quantitative analysis of, for example, the health benefits of art, is being promoted through the Centre for Arts and Humanities in Medicine and early results from trials are most promising (National Network for Arts in Health, 2001, <http://www.nnah.org.uk>). However, neither the simple measurement of inputs and outputs, nor indeed the reduction of outcomes to quantitative measurements of personal satisfaction or growth are always sufficient to capture the collective, as well as the individual impact, of an artistic experience. Lingayah *et al.* (1996) discuss how indicators of cultural health can be agreed by a community, assessed over time, and if necessary revised, using the example of the Sustainable Seattle report, where quality of life factors are chosen and reviewed by the community itself. This approach, identifying what communities want and expect from the arts, rather than subordinating community based arts programmes to objectives formulated outside communities, offers a way forward that is more sensitive to the unique texture of artistic encounters. Useful - as opposed to accurate - evaluation reports need to consider not just the aggregated impact of arts programmes on individuals, but also their effect, and the extent to which it can be and is sustained, on the communities in which individuals live. While the studies reviewed above are essential to this process, it is clear that a broader range of evaluative techniques are necessary to capture the depth, as well as the breadth, of the encounter between communities and the creative arts.

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