

Foundation Seminar 13/02/15

What is the value of Community Theatre?

This document contains the notes taken from the seminar and any relevant links to other material. Some activities and open discussions have been omitted to keep this document readable.

Welcome from Neil.

This seminar will be looking at 'Why do we evaluate?' 'What do we evaluate?' and 'How do we evaluate?'

We welcome Dr Kerrie Schaefer who is an expert in this field, who will be talking about the 'What do we evaluate?' but firstly, Helen will talk to us about 'Why do we evaluate?'

Helen

Many people have said to me over the years 'Why do we need to prove ourselves?'

We all know how valuable the work is and can get quite cross about having to prove it all of the time to so many different people. We think we know, but no matter how many times I hear a new story, I am always surprised, always learning new things. There is still an element of surprise in every story I hear. So, I question whether we do really know how valuable this work is?

I was trying to think about why I'm still surprised when I have been working for acta for 20 years. I know that our work changes people. The change takes place in individuals and communities who take part. I think the surprise comes from the personal link and the emotional link that those stories have when you tell them. We should ask ourselves why those stories are so powerful.

Although we think we know the value of this work, we have a responsibility to collect, measure and quantify all the evidence that we can get our hands on.

There are three reasons why I think we should take that responsibility.

1. Advocate (for community theatre and participatory work.)

We all have a responsibility, particularly at the moment, to advocate. There are different people we need to advocate to:-

Funders: They are the main people who are asking for all sorts of different evaluation. Different funders will ask for different things.

Other Arts Organisations: I often find myself talking about the value of community theatre not to people outside of 'the arts' but to other arts organisations that might not fully understand what community theatre is, how it works and why is participatory work is of more value than some other arts.

2. Disseminate (our learning)

We learn all the time. We will never know it all. Every project we do, there are a whole load of learning points at the end of it. Some of those things are for ourselves but, more often than not, there are a whole range of things that other people can learn from a project we are evaluating. I think we have a responsibility to share it with other people.

There are people up and down the country who work in the same field who can learn a lot from us if we can communicate what we have learnt when we finish a project. We have a responsibility to communicate that.

Funders not only want to know if you achieved what you set out to do, but also 'what did you learn from doing the project that we gave you the money to deliver?' They are interested in the process and the challenges we had along the way and how we got over those.

3. For ourselves (to learn and improve ourselves)

There is always room for improvement. We should recognise that it's a fast, changing world and our response to how we are going to respond to the need is always changing. The need is never going to go away. It changes from time to time but there is always the need, lots of people would love the opportunity to create shows with acta, to take part in community theatre. We will never have enough resources to tackle all of this need. But, the way we can deliver our projects and the way we deliver our work is changing lots. I'm particularly thinking about new technologies, digital technologies. In terms of evaluation, there is hugely more opportunity now for film/ digital media to communicate our learning. We have embraced film in our evaluation to communicate some of the things we have learnt by doing projects.

Gas Girls film shown to illustrate these three points <https://www.acta-bristol.com/gas-girls-2/>

Neil Beddow

When we put in the bids for that project, we received money from the Arts Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund. We wanted to make a film as it can tell you lots of different things about our process, about the power and impact of it, you can hear the voices of the people involved. We wanted to tell a story to the Arts Council, to the HLF, all in the same film so it was quite complicated. We were very lucky to be working closely with a film maker who is doing a load of different work with acta and knows our work.

Question – How long did the project take?

Neil – 18 months. There was a lot of research and devising involved.

We've been working with Benjie Croce. We did not have any previous experience of creating film so we asked The Watershed for advice.

Question – I can't deliver a story unless I am passionate about it. How do you go about choosing your projects?

Neil – Sometimes people will come to us with a story that they want to tell. Recently, Ingrid and Rosalie worked with a group of Somali women who had autistic children. They approached us. Nura (instigator) had seen a show that we had done with another group of Somali women, then came to

us because she had started an organisation for Somali women with autistic children and that she would love to use community theatre to tell that story. It is very rare that we come up with a story. Usually the group come up with whatever story or play that it is they want to do. They invent their own things. It might be something that reflects their personal experiences or it might be a complete fantasy, because that is what they want to do.

In film, it is really great to hear the voices of the participants. It is often their voice which is the strongest.

Audience – When is something documentation and when is it Evaluation? Does it matter? With film, quite often, it is documentation rather than evaluation.

Neil – Good question. We will be looking at that later on in the seminar.

Neil welcomes Dr Kerrie Schaefer to present. *Please see accompanying presentation document.*

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Neil

When you apply for funding for a project, you have to set your outcomes for the project. What is the difference you are trying to make with your project? You set yourself a series of aims. That gives you a framework against which you can measure your progress.

At the beginning of this evaluation film, which is about a project that Ingrid did last summer in partnership with Arnos Vale Cemetery called 'Lost not forgotten'. We worked with a group of young adults to interpret research about the First World War. What I love about this film is that at the beginning, you will see Ingrid and Felicia from Arnos Vale Cemetery State really clearly what the aims of the project were and then the film shows you how they met them.

Lost Not Forgotten Film shown

Helen Tomlin

I am going to talk about our approach to data collection, documentation and evaluation.

For the last few years we have had a number of different monitoring frameworks that the whole team contribute to. A way in which everyone can input data centrally so that when I, or other people need to write an evaluation report or see how a project is going, all of that data is collected centrally. We have that for all of our workshops and it is the worker who is responsible for entering that information for their workshops. It includes – how many people attended the workshop, who they were, their gender, disabilities etc. They also write a summary of the plan for that workshop and how it went. The key bits for me are that I ask them to put any observations that they made in the session, any story capture, any particular things that were said to them that was important that they think I might be interested in when I am writing a report back to the funder. The top of that work sheet shows the aims of the project. It might be young people to improve confidence and communication skills or isolated older people to make friendships and feel more valued in the community.

Each time we have a performance, we monitor how many people come to that performance and we have different systems for collecting information about those audiences. We do the same thing that I'm sure everybody else does. We do a lot of questionnaires. People have got different attitudes towards questionnaires. I have spoken to different organisations over the years and a lot of people tell me they don't do questionnaires, people don't like them. But we know our audiences don't mind questionnaires. A lot of them tell us they quite like completing questionnaires after an acta show. We really value what they have to say.

Neil – catching an audience after a show is a really good time because what you get is their immediate response, their passionate response. Not only are they prepared to fill in a questionnaire, they really want to.

Helen – We often give our participants questionnaires. We have lots of different ways of getting feedback from participants. 1 to 1 interviews particularly with youth theatre members. We have developed a framework for monitoring over the years where each youth theatre member will have a 1 to 1 catch up with one of the workshop facilitators. There is a structure for that and a reward scheme.

More frequently we do group evaluation with the participants and we have a questionnaire that the whole group completes together. Large scale community play or a big event and you want a lot of feedback from everyone at the end.

We've recorded feedback using a camera to get people's feedback as well. We want to communicate to everybody that we are interested in hearing what people have to say and we will use the results. There is no point in using questionnaires if you haven't got time to read them. We really analyse the results and really do learn from what people say and it will change what happens in the next project.

Keep them short- one side of A4. Plan in the time for people to complete them. Buy a big box of pens. Include a mix of questions, easy and more unusual, interesting and open questions. Include tick boxes. Some people will only fill out tick boxes but others will write a few words.

We do most of the evaluation ourselves and rarely employ an external evaluator. A few years ago, we worked with an external evaluator for a project that was called 'Open Circle' which was a family learning project funded through the Lottery. It was for parents and children to engage in creative play together, a four year project.

It was really important for all of us that we did a proper evaluation of that project and to really focus on interviews. We wanted to do a lot of face to face interviews with all of the participants and also the partners. We had also worked with a range of different partner organisations, children's centres and schools, different community groups who would refer families to the project. I learnt loads. I worked together with the evaluator which was a really useful exercise for me. There is a copy of that report on our website if anybody would like to see it.

*Open Circle report can be viewed here <https://www.acta-bristol.com/about-us/publications/> *

One particularly interesting was that because it was a four year project and the participants were young children, there were some families that Katie (worker who delivered the project) had not seen for a long time so there was a longitudinal aspect to it. People were able to look back and think

'what did I get out of it?' and you get completely different answers if you are asking people to remember. Particularly with the children who were 9 years or so, thinking back to the project when they were 5. Katie arranged to show film of the children taking part in the workshop so they were able to view themselves engaging. That was really effective.

Because it was a creative play project, Katie organised some creative workshops for us to do (while evaluating) so it wasn't just asking questions. We also visited people at home to interview them. It was a really lovely approach to evaluation.

We will show a video of another project with our Malcolm X Elders theatre group. It features some interviews with the participants.

*Video can be viewed here - <https://www.acta-bristol.com/grey-matters-2/> *

Neil

We have regularly gone back to participants who engaged a few years back to ask how they have developed and what they gained after participating in our work and it is fascinating the answers that we get. It is really worth going back and asking them, after a period of time 'How do you now measure what that project did for you?' Often you need distance from the project to really appreciate the impact it made on them. `

There is a place for the number-crunching - How many people came to the sessions and how long did they come for? What was their age? All of it is useful but the stuff that people want to hear is 'How did people benefit / change?' 'How did what you did make a difference in their lives' It's much harder to measure, which is when hearing it from the participant is so much more powerful.

Arguably it's not always about the most powerful story. Sometimes people want the facts and figures. Linking up with Dr Kerrie Schaefer's presentation earlier, about 5 years ago, and after the current government came to power, there was a lot of talk about 'investment'. At that point, acta decided to do a Social Return on Investment study. At the time, we were being funded by Bristol City Council to deliver work with young people across the city in prevention and early intervention unit. The SROI was an attempt to quantify the value of our work, to say that for every pound invested in acta, this is how many pounds society or the state is getting back.

To do this I looked at our work with young carers. Our work improved employability skills and also improved health and particularly mental health. We made a case that we were saving the state in welfare benefits and arrived at a figure which was for every £1 invested in acta, we saved the state over £14.

It is important to think about what you remember about a story when you are evaluating. Visual aspects? Language? What makes a story stick? I think this video has a good story.

*Watch 'A Tale or Two For You' here - <https://www.acta-bristol.com/arts-communities/> *

We are very lucky to be able to work with Benjie our film maker, but you don't need to have a big budget and work with a film maker for effective story capture evaluation.

This film was created very quickly and easily, using an old camera and some simple free software. It effectively captures audience reactions after a show.

*See this film here - <https://www.acta-bristol.com/grey-matters-2/> *

For more ideas for story capture techniques, click on the links below:

Storify - <https://storify.com/>

Slideshare -

http://www.slideshare.net/search/slideshow?searchfrom=header&q=participatory+art&ud=any&ft=all&lang=*&sort=

Spark London - <http://www.sparklondon.com/>

Art and film - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a2T6o57ic_g

Visual/ Art - <http://www.creativeconnection.co.uk/>

Creative Data Club - <http://www.soundandmusic.org/createdata>

“Creative and Alternative methods for collecting data” a presentation from www.uwex.edu
https://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CCQFjAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.uwex.edu%2Fces%2F4h%2Fevaluation%2Fdocuments%2Fcreativemethods.ppt&ei=xS73VKuMFC7aatzvgYgC&usg=AFQjCNFjjGy9FLVklLQR_W6xrN9goLIR0g&sig2=KLxKPa_s60dFdqp0qRF8IA

“Tried and Tested Creative Evaluation Ideas”

https://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CEQFjAA&url=https%3A%2F%2Fczzone.eastsussex.gov.uk%2Fsupportingchildren%2Fyouth%2Fyouthparticipation%2Ftoolkits%2FDocuments%2Fessentials_evaluation_toolkit_2008.pdf&ei=xS73VKuMFC7aatzvgYgC&usg=AFQjCNGW05SLJC2Z5F3tRe5OMFNCX5fGOW&sig2=6PYfWISmd7uspRRatV-WRA

Ted Talk - Andrew Stanton: The clues to a great story (Some explicit language used)

https://www.ted.com/playlists/62/how_to_tell_a_story