

Report on a conversation: Evaluating remote or online creative activities during the pandemic

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Highlights

Changes in approaches to evaluating creative activities for arts, health and wellbeing delivered remotely or online during COVID-19 have been prompted by increased flexibility from funders and the continuing desire to find appropriate, accessible and sustainable ways to access participant experience.

Creative practice has shown itself capable of adapting at speed in response to Covid-19. In this context, evaluators and arts organisations and practitioners are also asking: “How do we use existing forms of evaluation without being limited by them?” They are reflecting on how participatory and creative approaches to evaluation might support its integration into project delivery, make participants feel more like people and less like data, and enable access to participant voices, authentic stories and experience.

Evaluation is considered crucial to honing emerging practice, ensuring appropriateness and meeting participant needs. It continues to be seen as critical in terms of providing evidence of outcomes. However, with funders demonstrating their flexibility, some in the sector are feeling more able to question the type of evaluation that is most useful. This has been accompanied by a shift from measuring quantitative outcomes to qualitative impact and process evaluation. Evaluation of innovations in practice resulting from responses to COVID-19 could help shape the long-term development of the arts and health sector.

These are some of the themes uncovered through a recent curated online conversation on the subject of evaluation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, hosted by Creative and Credible, Willis Newson, Arts and Health South West and the Culture Health and Wellbeing Alliance, in association with Professor Norma Daykin and Dr Karen Gray.

About the event

The free event took place on 8th September 2020. It brought together an invited group of 36 mainly

UK-based arts practitioners, evaluators and researchers interested in discussing evaluating creative practice for health and wellbeing during the pandemic. Short keynote presentations from the field provided catalysts for facilitated breakout discussions, with summaries of these presented back to the plenary group. Proceedings were recorded and notes transcribed.

The aims were to gauge the sector’s response to the crisis in terms of conducting evaluation, to provide an opportunity for sharing experience and resources, and to kickstart further discussion.

In reporting the conversation, we further detail the themes highlighted above, and outline the challenges and opportunities described by attendees. We provide a short account of each of the keynote presentations and end with some questions as prompts for future research and discussion.

Themes

Discussion highlighted the many improvisational and innovative ways in which arts and health practice is responding to Covid-19. However, as arts, health and wellbeing practice is adapting at breakneck speed, the key challenges for evaluation, thrown into sharp relief by the pandemic, remain much the same: a lack of time and resources, concerns around rigour, and ethical worries around including and not burdening participants.

Attendees confirmed that evaluation is considered critical for providing evidence of outcomes that might help support the arts and cultural sector through tough times to come. However, as funders have demonstrated themselves to be open and flexible about evaluation during the pandemic, some in the

sector are feeling more able to question the type of evaluation that is likely to be useful. During the pandemic this has been accompanied by a shift from quantitative outcomes evaluation to qualitative impact and process evaluation.

Evaluation was described as crucial to honing emerging practice, ensuring appropriateness and best meeting participant needs. It was felt too early to assess quality in relation to practice while we are still in the process of defining it, however it was suggested that evaluation of innovations



Visual notes by Robyn Dowlen

developed in response to Covid-19 had an important role to play in shaping future development of the sector.

A variety of tools is being used. These include online polls and surveys, digital whiteboards, telephone and online interviews and focus groups. Attendees showed a particular interest in integrating participatory and creative evaluation into programme delivery, for example using storytelling, picture prompts, drawing and reflective and reflexive self-evaluation tools. Some attendees described recording and analysing activity taking place online, as well as using social media, apps and anonymous peer-to-peer networks to gather feedback.

While, 'online' may have opened a new space for evaluation, this is not without its challenges. They include digital inequalities, lack of direct access to participants, safeguarding, GDPR, ensuring rigour when responses are fast and adaptive, and identifying whether changes seen are the result of the creative activity or reflect external factors, including those related to the course of the pandemic.

Finally, our conversation highlighted the need for collaborative and co-produced approaches to evaluation capable of reflecting the diverse values and needs of participants, stakeholders, funders and policy makers.

Keynote presentations

In her presentation, Dr Karen Gray questioned whether and how evaluation of the adaptive, emergent, and sometimes innovative responses of arts organisations may call for the application or development of different methods, measures and tools. She illustrated this with a description of her ongoing evaluation of the COVID-19 response of [Intergenerational Music Making](#), a charity that works with children, young people and older people, including those with dementia. She proposed the definition and description of new processes that are being used alongside the understanding the experiences of those taking part as being crucial first steps to understanding what approaches it will be appropriate to apply to their evaluation in remote and online contexts. Such a focus would also help organisations to understand what aspects of their adapted processes they can sustain and incorporate within future ways of working.

Nicky Goulder is Founding Chief Executive of [Create](#), a charity offering a range of opportunities for disadvantaged and vulnerable people to take part in creative arts experiences. 'Crucial' was also the term she used to describe the role played by evaluation following the organisation's forced re-design of its programmes during the pandemic. As previously, Create has been keen to understand

whether its work contributes to building skills, reducing isolation and enhancing wellbeing for participants; it has also been reliant on feedback that can incorporate multiple voices in order to adapt quickly and apply necessary changes in process. For some of the marginalised participants with whom it works, such as young and adult carers, online delivery has increased access to creative activity. Supporting those requiring additional help to report their experience at a distance has not been easy though, making it important not to rely on any one method alone. Detailed and regular conversations with partners, making time for participants to complete online surveys within a final project workshop, use of simple polls and other voting mechanisms, and targeted one-to-one phone calls with participants have all been helpful. Nicky also noted the persuasive power of a self-created video telling the story of a participant young carer's long-standing involvement with the organisation.

Participatory approaches are part and parcel of the socially engaged theatre practice of [Collective Encounters](#), as well as of the methods the organisation uses to evaluate. Claire Sharples, an independent evaluator and researcher who works with the organisation, outlined some of the collaborative evaluation processes she has been using. A key concern has been that evaluation processes used during the pandemic should reflect the plurality of needs and potential outcomes of importance for individual participants. Claire described how access to video recordings of online theatre workshops has meant that evaluation can capture and make better use of the rich, descriptive, and inherently narrative nature of the arts practice itself. These recordings can be augmented with facilitators' notes and feedback from participants. However, the introduction of the digital space into practice is raising questions over how to ensure that it and its evaluation remain safe, ethical, and equitable. The kind of individually-focused ways of working she is using for evaluation are also – she recognised – time and labour intensive. Trust, resulting from long-standing relationships with funders and participants has been an enabling factor in making all of this possible. The theme of evaluation as integral to creative practice was central to the presentation by Dr Maria Hayes. An artist and facilitator, she has been working on one of four projects forming part of the NESTA-funded YLab [HARP COVID-19 Sprint Challenge](#). Over the course of seven days, participants who identified as lonely and living alone were encouraged to take part in 15-minute creative activities designed to boost their wellbeing. Maria developed a bespoke wellbeing measure for the project: a hand-drawn and coloured wheel, with a pointer turned by hand to mark an individual's state of well or ill-being. Each option was matched with suggestions intended to encourage movement towards positive feelings and actions. Participants used the tool to indicate their state before the week began and after it ended, as well as before and after engaging with each

creative activity. They photographed and emailed the images to Maria to record their response, their state, and their participation in the challenge. It proved both an effective monitoring tool, a measure of subjective wellbeing, and a form of self-evaluation enabling participants to reflect while laying the foundations for positive creative activity. Its tactile nature provided a useful material counterpoint to a world and time in which many interactions have gone digital.

The final keynote presentation was from John McMahon, arts and health lead for Arts Council England (ACE). He acknowledged the contradictory pressures faced by arts organisations wishing both to advocate and provide evidence of the efficacy of their work. He noted ACE's commitment through its 10-year ['Let's Create'](#) strategy to partnership working that will build a sector wide evidence base factoring in the dual need to support creative practice for arts, health and wellbeing and to influence policy enabling it to better integrate within health and care services, including through social prescribing initiatives. He directed attendees' attention towards existing sources of research and evidence and reflected on the need for evaluators to start their work from a clear understanding of the audience and stakeholders. Identification and articulation of evidence in support of the positive impact of arts and cultural organisations in responding to COVID-19 would, he suggested, benefit from a collective effort if it is to both speak to policy nationally, and provide support for individuals and for organisations at local and regional levels.

Wellbeing Measure



How have people been evaluating during COVID-19?

Existing monitoring and data collection tools continue to be important, although these have often been transferred online. Paper-based questionnaires had been turned into digital surveys, and face to face interviews or focus groups are being conducted using Zoom or within closed Facebook groups. Some attendees described adding creative elements to online surveys and monitoring: images used as prompts to elicit information, or participants asked to draw their response rather than simply check a box. Online events were being recorded for observation and analysis. Digital

polls had provided a quick 'temperature gauge' of feelings during or at the beginning or end of an activity. Discussions held at the end of a final project workshop online allowed multiple stakeholders to take part. Participants had been encouraged to keep video or audio diaries of their experiences, and to share these with evaluators. Some had found digital 'post-it' note or white-board applications (such as [Google's Jamboard](#)) useful in encouraging anonymous feedback during or after an online event. Another attendee suggested enabling anonymous peer-to-peer communication through [phpBB open source bulletin board](#) software. A 'blind date' interview format had been used to allow for project participants to discuss their experience with each other.

Attendees were conscious of the need to allow evaluation participants to provide responses using a range of media. In addition to inequalities of access, it was noted that digital formats might be distrusted or provoke discomfort, as well as simply being unfamiliar. In-depth telephone conversations with a trusted individual, such as a key-worker, had sometimes proved more useful with particular participant groups, including vulnerable older people. There were examples of stories, drawings or printed postcards containing written feedback returned in the post or handed over on the doorstep. In one project in which creative resources had been hand-delivered, responses and conversations with participants had been filmed and recorded at the point of delivery. Practice diaries or facilitators' reflective notes continue to be used.

What have been the challenges for evaluation?

Some challenges described were familiar but had been brought into greater relief within the COVID-19 context. There was increased sensitivity around burdening evaluation participants experiencing the direct effects of the pandemic. Resources and time for evaluation had been stretched even more thinly than usual. Access to health and care settings was limited and –when possible – challenging to negotiate. Over-worked and stressed healthcare staff lacked the time and motivation to support evaluation. In addition, some of the methods being used such as video or audio recording were producing large amounts of data that was proving difficult to analyse. Other methods demanded close attention to the experiences of individuals, which could be time-consuming and emotionally draining. On top of this there was a moral question around how artists and others could justify spending time on reflection when all around them was in crisis and action seemed to be what was most required?

For evaluators, being remote from participants and a client organisation presents a challenge in itself. In many cases they had been left to rely on the observations of others to assess effects on

participants after an activity had ended, or to do the difficult work of assessing experience (sometimes also described as ‘mood’ or ‘atmosphere’) from a distance. There were decreased opportunities for gathering spontaneous feedback. Important physical spaces in which people might naturally be gathered together to talk and discuss, as well as to participate in the arts, have been temporarily lost and were not easily recreated using digital means. There were particular concerns that people with cognitive difficulties or without verbal communication, and those whose first language was not English were being left out of evaluation because the support was not available to enable it. There were worries that data were being collected from care staff or key workers, rather than directly from participants.



Visual notes by Emily Bradfield

Concerns around use of digital media have already been mentioned. It was also observed that although offline methods and tools used to collect data might be relatively easily transferred online, it could not be assumed that people’s behaviours in response to these tools would transfer so easily. An interview conducted on Zoom might provoke different responses from one done in person, or even on the telephone. A participant completing an online survey might be paying it a different kind of attention to that given to a paper questionnaire in the room. Attendees also mentioned infection control concerns when data entry had to take place using touch-screens in health or care settings.

It was noted that COVID-19 had led to organisations supporting participants to engage with a set of creative activities, but in widely different and not easily controlled contexts. They might be engaging on their own in their home, in a care or other residential setting such as a prison, they might be taking resources out into the landscape, they might be supported by family members, they might be taking part online in a wider group or community, or through artist facilitation in a COVID-secure offline setting. While the stimulus to activity and the resources for these might be the same, the effects, experiences and any comparisons between them could be difficult.

Attendees also reflected on the difficulties for accounting in evaluation for the role of external causal factors on projects. These include changing emotional or mental health concerns linked to the

course of the pandemic itself, its reporting in the media, and to changes in social distancing regulations over time or in particular geographical locations.

Finally, it was noted that while the positive social role played by arts and culture during the pandemic may be widely reported anecdotally, it was proving difficult to provide convincing evidence of this in forms that engage policymakers.

What are the opportunities?

More positively, discussion also highlighted ways in which the pandemic might be providing opportunities for evaluation. Wider public awareness of issues around mental health, loneliness, and social isolation had, it was suggested, contributed towards a more reflective public mood. This might be leading to potential openness to change in all areas of practice, including evaluation. Attendees reported reaching more, and sometimes more diverse participants through digital media. Some offline spaces in which evaluation could be conducted had gained greater visibility including outdoor settings such as gardens, parks, and pavements. Some attendees reported enhanced relationships with a wider public, outside of their own local or target audiences. For some, a transition to online formats had enabled the development of focused one-to-one relationships, lending valuable insight into individual experience. There was particular interest in developing evaluation practices, including those involving self-reflection or direct connection and conversation with an evaluator, that might themselves have therapeutic value, particularly in the pandemic context.

New partnerships appear a common feature of delivery of work over the pandemic period. Increased collaborative working between individuals, groups and organisations at national, regional, local, and hyper-local levels as well as across sectors may be creating opportunities for collective and shared evaluation responses. Attendees reported an increased willingness to engage in dialogue with funders, as well as funders being flexible and supportive of concerns around difficulties with reporting.

There was discussion around how improvisation within creative practice might be extended to evaluation – embracing methods that recognise and work within constraints, explore the use of existing forms without being limited by them, and taking on approaches formed and shaped through relationship and collaboration with others.

Looking to the future

With organisations forced to improvise and adapt creative practice in order to engage and support

audiences and participants despite physical restrictions imposed by the pandemic, a focus on process rather than outcomes in evaluation was widely welcomed as presenting opportunities for developing and improving practice.

Participatory and creative approaches to evaluation support its integration into arts practice. This offers the potential benefits of making participants feel more like people and less like data, and enabling access to participant voices, authentic stories and experience. Dr Maria Hayes' Creative Wellbeing Measure demonstrated that creativity can result in evaluation capable of producing data of value to participants as well as practitioners and arts organisations.

Our conversation raised interesting questions for future discussion. How can we best share insights from evaluation, and work alongside researchers and others to inform both practice and policy? How can the arts, health and wellbeing sector share expertise and work collectively, for example through developing case studies or by adapting arts-based research tools for evaluation? And, how can we continue to ensure quality by nurturing reflection in and on practice - even amidst a crisis?

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