State of the sector: how evidence-informed is cultural learning?

Evaluation is an opportunity both to understand the difference your work makes and to identify how to continually improve your practice. However, practitioners in cultural learning tell us that all too often, it can feel like it's undertaken primarily for someone else's benefit: an accountability exercise upon which future funding and success hangs, with increasingly high stakes against a backdrop of school budgetary challenges. The RSA and our partners – the Bridge Organisations, Arts Council England, Paul Hamlyn Foundation and others – believe that we can harness the unique strengths of the cultural sector to ensure that evaluation supports it to deliver the very best for children and young people everywhere.

In spite of increased pressure to evaluate, research indicates that while the cultural sector is evaluating more, its evaluation practices are simpler than those of the charity sector as a whole. A number of recent reviews, including from the OECD and EEF, have pointed to a paucity of rigorous evidence of the impact of cultural learning practice on academic attainment and non-cognitive (or character development) outcomes[1] for young people. This is not to say that these projects don't make a difference, but that there is a way to go in building up that evidence base so that we can tell a powerful story about the changes that participation in cultural learning brings about in children and young people.

Challenges and opportunities

Cultural organisations may face some unique challenges when it comes to monitoring and evaluation. Some relate to the friction between the 'potential of the arts to inspire' and their contribution to a wider social purpose. Or that it can seem challenging to prescribe at the outset of a programme the outcomes by which you will measure its success at the end if your process is flexible and changeable and you wish for the participant to direct their own journey.

And yet, we know that cultural learning practitioners may also have distinctive strengths when it comes to monitoring, evaluation and learning, whether it's deep understanding of reflective practice, or the potential to use the creativity that is the lifeblood of their work to develop innovative approaches.

Voice of the sector: what you told us

The RSA wanted to understand how cultural organisations are evaluating the work that they do in schools today. We surveyed organisations about current practice and support needs aligning our questions with previous research by NPC on impact evaluation in the voluntary sector. We invited any cultural organisation working with schools in England to respond to the survey and 107 organisations from every region of England[2] and all sectors

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[1] Non-cognitive outcomes include self-concept, motivation, locus of control, confidence, resilience, leadership skills and creativity

[2] London (39%), South East (14%), South West (11%), North East (9%), Yorkshire and the Humber (8%), East Midlands (6%), East of England (5%), North West (3%) and West Midlands (3%).

(public, private and voluntary)[3] responded. The responding organisations range in size from those operating on less than £100,000 annual income to major institutions with over £10m income per year, and in age from organisations operating for less than 12 months to one organisation that is over 1,000 years old. They offer activities in a broad range of arts and creative disciplines.[4]
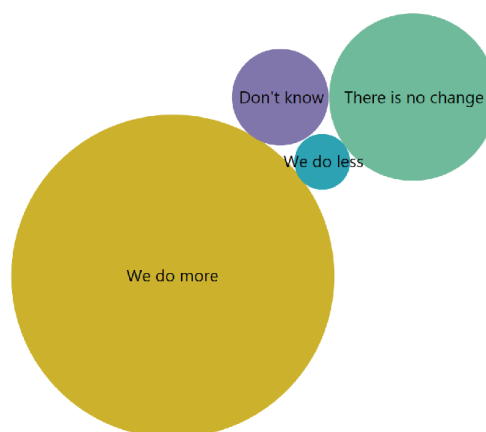
Current approaches to evaluation

72% of organisations said that they now do more monitoring and evaluation than five years ago, and only 2% said that they do less.

37% of organisations say that they now 'always' measure the changes that happen as a result of their work, with a further 34% saying that they 'often' do so.

The vast majority of these organisations (over 80%) say that they do so in order to improve their projects, or to know the difference that their work is making (76%). They were significantly less likely to say that they do so to meet funder requirements (29%).

Change in evaluation frequency over the last 5 years

87%

Don't know   There is no change

We do less

We do more

Current approach to evaluation

90%

Always ⟶ Never

71.9% stated they 'always' or 'often' measured changes that happened as a result of their work

Charities responding to our survey were more likely to state a desire to improve projects as their main motivation for doing more evaluation (88% of 46 charities responding). This contrasts starkly with the results of the 2012 survey of charities on which many of our questions are based. New Philanthropy Capital's survey found the rise in evaluation across the charity sector from 2007 had very different motivations. Over half of charities surveyed by NPC said that they were doing more evaluation because of a change in funder requirements, compared with just 5% who wanted to improve the quality of their service and 4% who wanted to know the difference their services were making.

This may reflect a recent cultural shift towards using evaluation for continuous learning, rather than simply for accountability. Such a shift across the cultural sector would, as Caroline Sharp of the National Foundation for Education Research recently put it in an interview with the RSA, "demonstrate a strong commitment to continuous improvement,

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[3] Charity (58%), Social enterprise (16%), Government body or service (6%), For-profit company (4%), Sole traders (3%), Don't know (1%)
[4] Music (offered by 51% of respondents), Theatre (46%), Visual Arts (45%), Combined Arts (44%), Heritage-related learning (39%), Digital Media (38%), Dance (36%), Literature (30%)

including partnering with schools to achieve their objectives around improving outcomes for children."[5] The RSA would welcome such a shift, but our survey indicates a need for more skills, sharing opportunities and funding if this ambition is to be fulfilled.

How strong are current evaluation approaches?

Despite increased evaluation rates across the cultural learning sector, few cultural organisations use the most robust evaluation methods. Only five of the organisations we surveyed had used studies with comparison groups (comparing the results of children who participated in the project with a group that did not) and none had engaged in randomised control trials (as above, except that children/schools are randomly assigned into the group).

Randomised control trials are not always an appropriate tool: lack of access to expertise, high costs and the scale required for a robust study are barriers to most organisations. However, it is reasonably straightforward to develop a counterfactual[6] by creating a comparison group. A comparison group does not receive the project you are delivering but is otherwise similar to the group that does, allowing you to compare what happens when the activity takes place with what happens when it does not. NPC have produced useful guidance on what a comparison group is and how you might establish one. This approach is achievable even for a small organisation: three of the five organisations responding to the survey who had used comparison groups had an annual turnover of less than £250,000.

Information collected in the last year

Recorded outputs (e.g. number of workshops delivered)	71
Used one-off surveys of participating children/young people	60
Used one-off surveys of participating teachers/school staff	60
Used interviews of participating children/young people	44
Used interviews of participating teachers/school staff	43
Used before & after surveys of children/young people	39
Used independent observations of practice	38
Used before & after surveys of teachers/school staff	35
Used before & after tests of children/young people's knowledge/understanding of a school subject	16
Used studies with comparison groups	5
Anecdotal observations	3
None of the above	3
All of the above	1
Used randomised control trials	0

Similarly, less than 18% of organisations used tests of students' understanding of a subject e.g. a reading comprehension test or a music sight-reading test. Of these, 82% developed their test in-house and only 3% used standardised tests. This makes it hard to know if the tests give a true indication of any gains made or to compare the impact of one activity with others. It can be challenging to identify an appropriate test, but there are resources to support you to identify project and age-appropriate tests including this searchable database from EEF.

As you can see from the chart above, most organisations (68%) are using one-off surveys and three who chose the 'other' option referred to collection of anecdotal evidence, which is unlikely to serve either accountability or organisational learning needs very effectively.
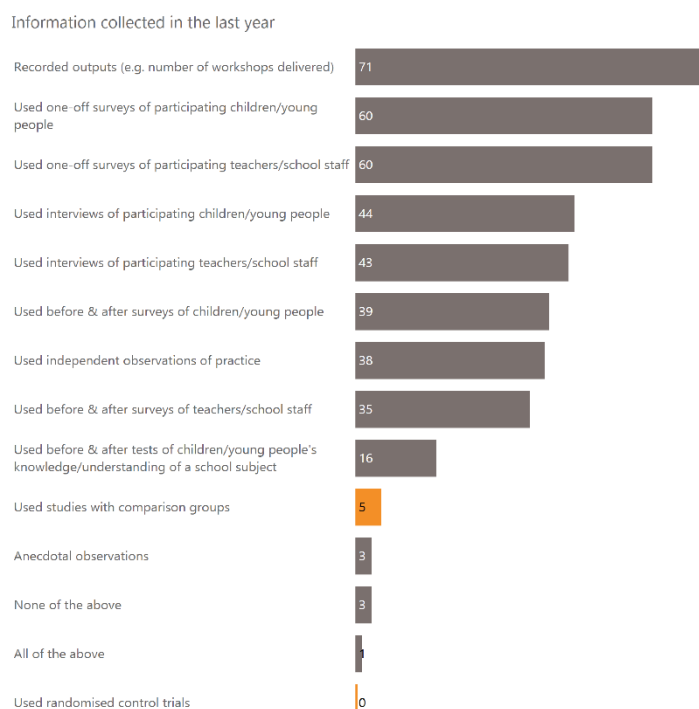
[5] Sharp, C. (2017). *Use of evidence in the education sector*. 22nd September. RSA. [interview]
[6] A counterfactual is the result if the intervention does not take place.

While organisations identified a broad range of academic and character outcomes that their work contributes to, only 40% have developed a theory to explain how activities they deliver might lead to change. The most common benefits of the process of developing a theory of change for those who had undertaken to do so was 'the opportunity to reflect on our work and how it makes a difference' (59% of respondents), suggesting that this could be an enjoyable and even motivating experience for staff, as well as contributing to a more strategic approach to evaluation.

Theory of Change

Yes 40%

No 60%
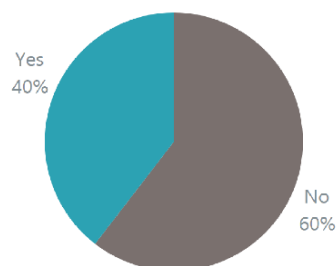
Barriers to best practice in evaluation

82% of those organisations that do not have a theory of change in place say that they have not had sufficient resources to develop one. However, smaller organisations were significantly more likely to have a theory of change in place (48% of organisations with less than £500,000 turnover, compared with 34% of those bringing in more than £500,000 per annum), suggesting that total financial resource is not the barrier.

The availability of core funding or funding dedicated to long-term evaluation may be an issue: just under 40% of respondents said that they spend less than 1% of their annual budget on evaluation. This question of funding for evaluation is something we will be exploring further with arts organisations and strategic funders throughout the Learning About Culture programme.

74% of organisations said that their staff lack the skills to develop evaluative approaches that might demonstrate that their work brings about the outcomes they have identified. This is unsurprising given that only 29% of organisations who responded to our survey have a team member whose role it is to oversee or deliver evaluation, and over a third of respondents say that none of their staff have received evaluation training. It is crucial that all organisations wanting to continually improve their offer to schools have opportunities to access to training and development opportunities. In light of this, RSA will be working with the Arts Council Bridge Organisations over the next two years to explore how we can make learning opportunities available to organisations of all sizes.

Use of evidence from elsewhere

Drawing on existing research, whether from academic institutions, strategic organisations or other practitioners can support effective programme design. 86% of respondents who have used evidence from other sources do so most commonly to 'help them design new projects' or to 'compare their work to other projects'.

However, less than a third of organisations surveyed find it easy to find evidence relevant to their project from other organisations or academic sources. 36% find it 'quite difficult' or 'very difficult' and 14% have never even tried to do so. This reflects findings from our

analysis of the review of applications to the Cultural Learning Fund.[7] Only 66% of grant applicants provided any evidence from other sources as part of their application when prompted and only 30% of these provided evidence that provided a rationale for the activities proposed. In many cases, organisations drew on general evidence for the art form, or for cultural learning more broadly (often from advocacy rather than research papers), and many failed to explain the relevance to the specific activity described. For example, providing evidence about the impact of ensemble music activities for a project about one-on-one instrumental tuition.

One explanation for the difficulties faced by cultural organisations in identifying appropriate sources of information is offered by responses to a survey question about organisations' current approaches to sharing the evidence they have gathered. Nearly 80% of organisations shared their evaluation reports with funders, but only just over 50% share this information on their website and 40% in their annual report, both of which would facilitate use of their evidence by other organisations. It is also worth noting that several organisations highlighted, in open text responses, the difficulty of accessing centralised evidence databases to support them to do this.

Where to next?

Monitoring, evaluation and learning
More support is needed to improve the way all organisations evaluate their work. Over 50% of respondents said that they would benefit from training and guidance about how to evaluate (awareness and understanding of techniques), more appropriate tools for evaluating cultural learning and increased funding for evaluation.

Using evidence from elsewhere
35% of organisations chose 'opportunities to develop practice and share findings with other similar organisations' as the thing that would most support them to use evidence from other projects effectively. There seems to be a current gap in this sort of peer learning with only 29% of respondents stating that they currently share their evaluation practice and findings through groups like *What Next?*

Over the next two years, the *Learning about Culture* programme will be looking to respond to these needs through:

1. Training and peer learning networks in partnership with the Bridge Organisations

2. Developing tools to share best practice in evaluation and enable more cultural learning providers to evaluate their work effectively

3. Hosting conversations with funders about how they can support evaluation in the sector, in partnership with Paul Hamlyn Foundation and Bank of America Merrill Lynch

To find out more about how you can get involved in the Learning about Culture programme, please contact culturallearning@rsa.org.uk

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[7] A round of grant funding to be part of EEF and RSA trials on cultural learning activities in English schools that was open for applications in January 2017.