
Providing the evidence: Creating an evidence base

‘What am I trying to do? Why am I trying to do it? How will I know if I’ve succeeded or not?’

Ian Moss Createquity, 2012.160

Finding a way to prove the value of engaging people with the arts is a little like the search for the Holy Grail. Presenting evidence to funders often means engaging with complex lists of tools and processes, many derived from fields other than the arts: Psychology, Health, Development, Human Rights, Education, Social Science. All of them favouring different approaches to evaluation and imposing different criteria on the work.

Logic models and theories of change

In her damning blog post on what is wrong with foundations,¹⁶¹ Arlene Goldbard names her particular *bête-noirs*: ‘I refer in particular to three bits of new orthodoxy stuck like shreds of spinach in the present-day foundation lexicon: *best practices*, *logic models*, and *theories of change*.’ The search for ‘best practices’, she suggests, mitigate completely against risk-taking on the part of funders while suggesting anything that works is completely replicable, regardless of context. Logic models and theories of change¹⁶² are as fiercely dismissed, as devices for ‘reducing the aims, assumptions and activities embodied in a particular project...to a chart!’

Although Ian Moss’ blog for Createquity¹⁶³ ‘*In Defense of Logic Models*’ provides some kind of redress, presenting the case for the defense as well as the prosecution, the negative responses and comments are almost all from artists. Despite reflective practice being central to every artist’s creative process, an inbuilt resistance to what can often feel like ‘checkbox mentality’ endures.

But artists are not alone in wanting to question the ubiquity of what social scientists and philosophers such as Hayek and Popper sometimes identify as ‘scientism’. Speaking about outcome-based evaluation in Community Change¹⁶⁴, Stoecker compares it to conducting a quasi experiment, ‘designed to measure the difference between a baseline (data collected before the project begins) and an endpoint, with some form of intervention in between’. He highlights the difficulty of, firstly, finding ‘data that is measurable’ and, secondly, of ‘counting things - even when that’s what you are trying to do’. How, he asks, can evaluations be anything other than a ‘quasi experiment’ when most lack control groups (people who haven’t had the experience) and few have the time or funding to take other influences into account. Mirroring Goldbard, he underlines the fact that unlike scientists, those of us working with communities are, ‘operating in the real world rather than in a laboratory’.

Goldbard does go on to acknowledge the basic questions asked in theory of change/logic models are the ones any artist/arts organisation would want to ask of any project:

- What do we want to accomplish?
- What do we need to do to accomplish it?

¹⁶⁰ Moss, I. <http://createquity.com/2012/06/in-defense-of-logic-models.html>

¹⁶¹ Goldbard, A. (2010) *Here to get your hopes up*. <http://arlenegoldbard.com/2010/05/27/924/>

¹⁶² Theory of change is defined as being “all building blocks required to bring about a given long-term goal” (Center for Theory of Change, 2012). A logic model is a graphical depiction of these building blocks.

¹⁶³ Moss, I. *ibid*

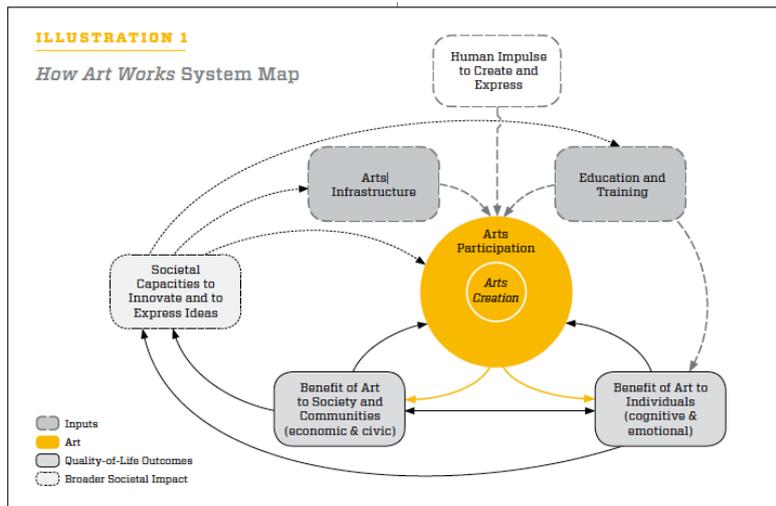
¹⁶⁴ Stoecker, R. (2012) *Research Methods for Community Change: A Project-Based Approach: A Project-Based Approach*. SAGE

- What do we expect the short term/long-term outcomes to be?

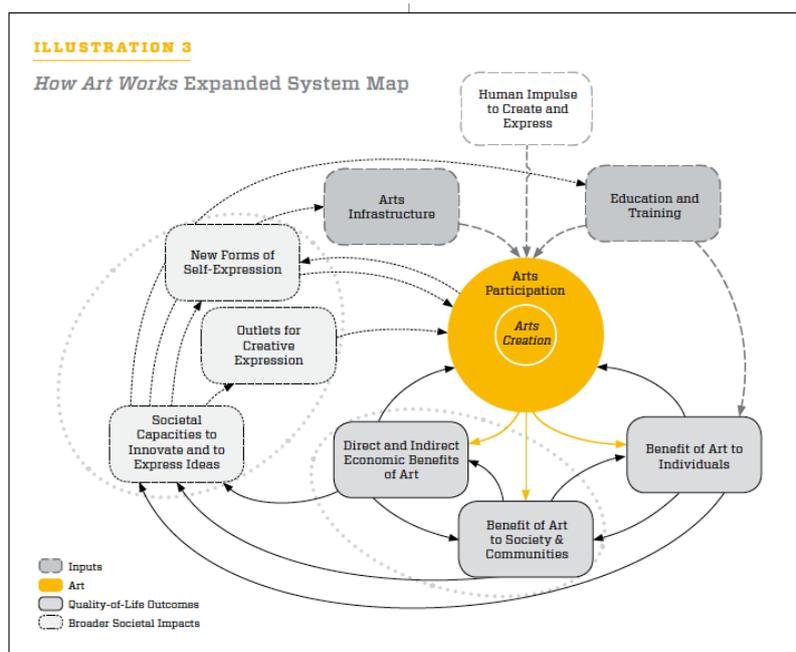
It is the pseudo-scientific ways we are often asked to ‘prove’ these, when what we are dealing with is ‘actual human beings’ that discomforts her.

Arts Based Models

The ‘*How Art Works*’ 2012 report for the US National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) offers a possible alternative. Placing the making of art and participation in the arts at the centre, it draws on more recent work in the social and physical sciences, and uses ‘system mapping’ (demonstrating the interconnectedness between different ideas) to create what it names ‘a Theory of Change for the Arts’.



Here the interrelatedness between creative inputs (making art) and possible outcomes (impact on people’s lives) are captured in a non-linear system of cause and effect. This basic map is then expanded to demonstrate how particular outcomes, such as economic benefits, might fit into the model.



Whilst acknowledging, the work is still very much at a preliminary research stage. Its authors propose one useful starting point might be to begin distinguishing between ‘value’ and ‘impact’.

Value, they suggest, being something best captured in ‘descriptive information, primarily statistical’ and concerned with the economic ‘characteristics, and conditions’ of the arts ecosystem. (Quantitative evidence)

Impact, on the other hand, being ways of describing and demonstrating the benefits of the arts to wider society. e.g. capturing its impact on:

- Health and Well-Being
- Cognitive Capacity, Learning, and Creativity
- Community Livability
- Economic Prosperity (Qualitative evidence)

A more holistic approach

Building on this proposition, Kim Dunphy¹⁶⁵ agrees a ‘theory of change model’ is a useful approach to planning projects. What she feels is currently missing from the NEA model, is the possibility to differentiate between things like the length and intensity of people’s engagement. I.e. is what is being proposed just a unique experience or an on-going collaboration? As well as a means to identify whether the participation is anything other than nominal.

In her attempt to create a framework that captures some of this complexity she proposes starting by identifying our *values* as artists/arts organisations, then being clear what we want to achieve, and finally deciding (with our participants wherever possible) how we think we can show we have achieved it. Noting on the way where we are now, what resources we have access to and what particular activities are going to get us to where we want to be.

All our outcomes, she suggests, could then be captured in a more holistic, ‘dimensions of change’ model.

Taking John Hawke’s four pillars of sustainability for the Culture Development Network as her starting point¹⁶⁶, she proposes six dimensions (each of which has a number of sub-dimensions) of impact:

- Cultural Vitality;
- Economic Vitality;
- Social Equity;
- Environmental Sustainability;
- Personal/Spiritual Well-being; and
- Civic Engagement.

By approaching evaluation in this way she maintains we will be better able to capture, ‘all possible outcomes of a participatory arts initiative, including outcomes that were intended or unintended, positive, or negative.’

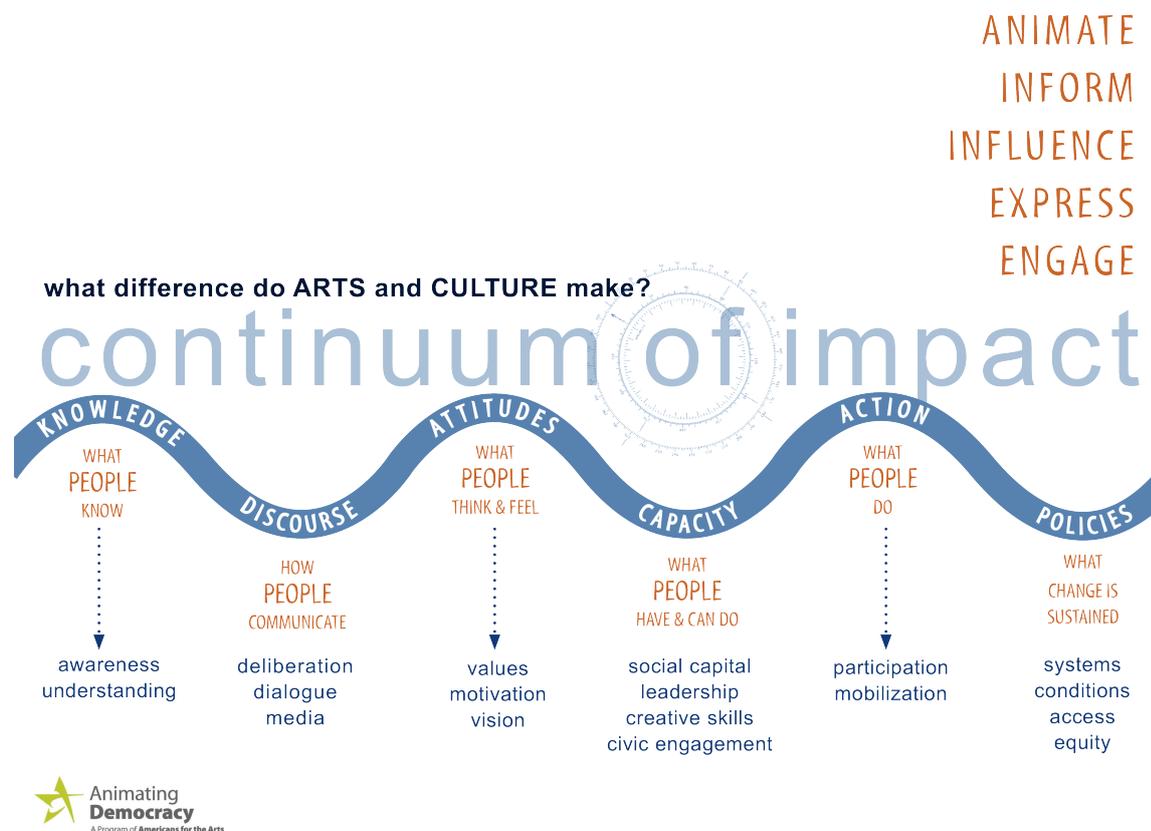
¹⁶⁵ Dunphy, K. (2012) *The Role of Participatory Arts in Social Change in Timor Leste: Discussing Outcomes for Project Stakeholders*
https://www.academia.edu/1831452/The_role_of_participatory_arts_in_social_change_in_Timor_Leste_discussing_outcomes_for_project_stakeholders Accessed Nov 2013

¹⁶⁶ Hawkes, J. (2001), *The fourth pillar of sustainability*. Melbourne: Cultural Development Network.

There is nothing in what Dunphy, Stoecker or the NEA proposes that any artist or arts organisation would disagree with in terms of outcomes. Whilst Dunphy’s model in particular might seem dauntingly complex she, like the NEA, does not suggest any single project would be likely to lead to all these outcomes nor that we should be necessarily attempting to measure all of them. For those who continue to share Goldbard’s frustration around how to best to ‘evidence’ what we may have a clear sense ‘happened’, Animating Democracy’s¹⁶⁷ Continuum of Impact offers alternative approaches.

Clarity of Intention

What finally matters, they suggest, in capturing the effect of a particular project is having *clarity of intention* about the impact we hope to have and proposing a clear timeframe within which we hope to achieve it.



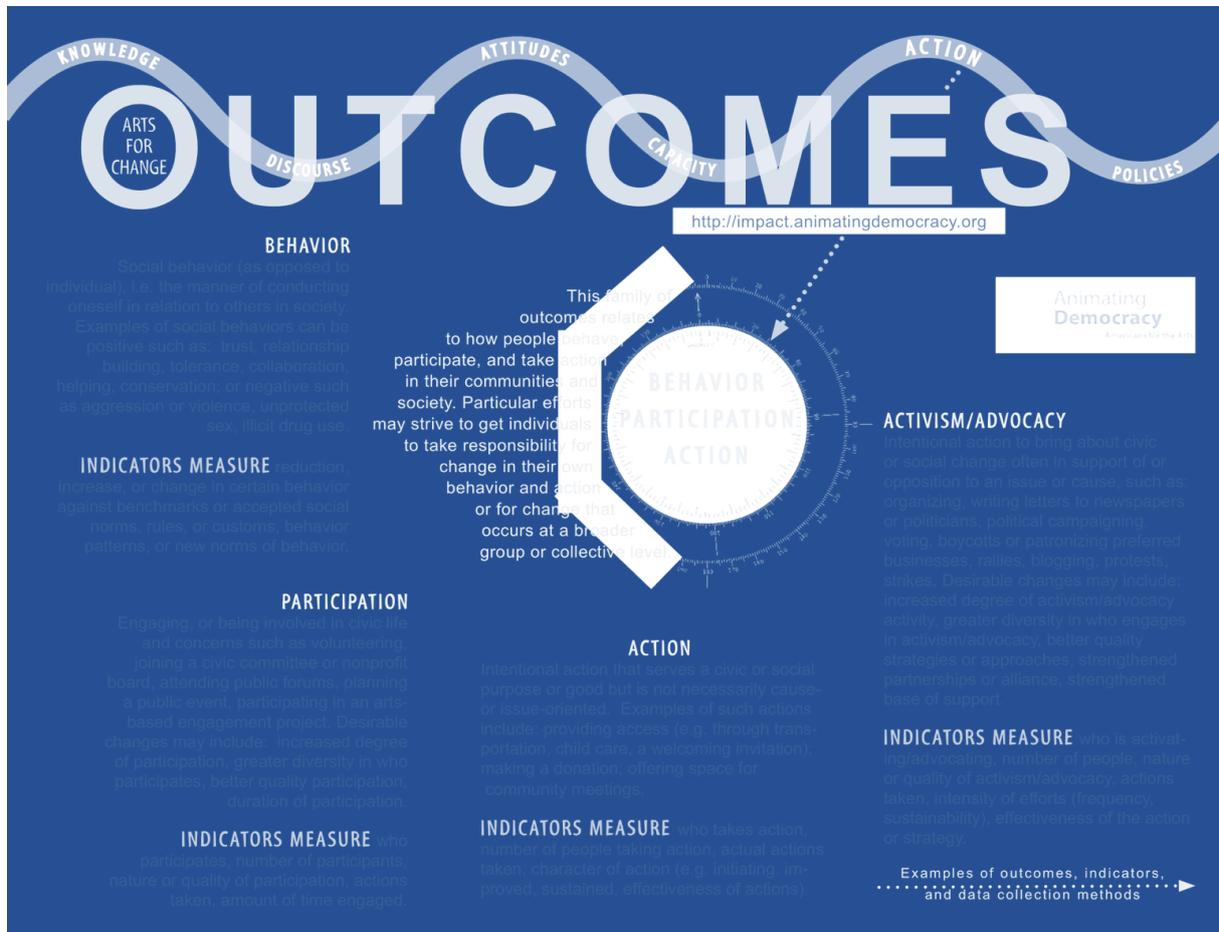
They too propose 6 categories of outcomes, making it clear, ‘There is no necessary sequence or hierarchy of importance among these outcomes; nor are they mutually exclusive. A single program could achieve outcomes at more than one point on the continuum.’ These are:

- Changes in Awareness & Knowledge – what people know
- Changes in Attitudes & Motivation – what people think and feel
- Changes in Behaviour & Participation – what people do
- Changes in Discourse – what is being said and heard
- Changes in Capacity – know-how and resource

¹⁶⁷ <http://animatingdemocracy.org/social-impact-indicators>

- **Changes in Systems, Policies, & Conditions** — change that is lasting

For each category they provide links to possible indicators against which success might be evidenced.



These are subsequently linked to methods and tips for collecting data appropriate to each outcome and a vast number of possible techniques to use. ‘Outcome Harvesting’¹⁶⁸, for example works on a ‘forensic science’ approach: collecting evidence at the end of the project and working backwards to determine what contributed to the change, while the wonderfully named, ‘Ripple Effect Mapping’¹⁶⁹ meanwhile draws on elements of Appreciative Inquiry¹⁷⁰, mind mapping, group interviewing, and qualitative data to visually map the ‘performance story’.

Art Council England’s ‘Self-Evaluation Framework’¹⁷¹ section on ‘Participation and Engagement’ largely focuses on participation as audience development. Offering a series of questions one might want to ask and a 5-point plan that includes, agreeing the scope of the project, defining the evidence, collecting the information, analysing the information and reaching conclusions. It notes this will mean using ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ (quantitative and qualitative) measures. It further suggests drawing one’s evidence, ‘from more than one source to ensure that your conclusions are reliable, applicable and valid.’

¹⁶⁸ http://www.managingforimpact.org/sites/default/files/resource/outcome_harvesting_brief_final_2012-05-2-1.pdf

¹⁶⁹ <http://blog.lib.umn.edu/vitality/ripple-effect-mapping/>

¹⁷⁰ a positive focused approach to solving problems by looking at what is working

¹⁷¹ <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/selfevaluation/framework/>

One of the dangers of trying to promote ‘best practice’, Goldbard argues, is it often ignores the importance of context. Yet Moss suggests the questions are almost always the same. ‘What am I trying to do? Why am I trying to do it? How will I know if I’ve succeeded or not?’¹⁷² Changing the ‘I’ to ‘we’ (participants, partners, communities) and focusing on the particular context in which we find ourselves working might be a useful starting point.

¹⁷² <http://createequity.com/2012/06/in-defense-of-logic-models.html>