RESPONSIVE SUSTAINABLE EVALUATION

Arts Program Theory, Participation and Evaluation

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As the context for art organizations changes, so does the role and means of evaluation. Greater emphasis on diversification due to the phasing out of traditional industries has put increased pressure on other non-traditional sectors, including the arts, to take on a bigger role in the knowledge economy. Arts organizations face increased competition for limited consumer time and money, continued lack of resources, and contextual changes happening faster than ever. Evaluation provides insight into how the organization or program is operating within this context and whether they are truly being responsive to it in an effective way. After economic downturn, grant makers and funders are also faced with decreases in available funds for giving. Many of them have had to be more particular or specific in how they grant funds, tightening their belts and being more cautious. All of these elements mean that organizations have to be more aware of inner strengths and weaknesses as well as outward challenges and opportunities. They must be more responsive to their audiences and community needs, and must be more adaptable to change. I really appreciated our conversations about complex change and how organizations must be dynamic and responsive, constantly ensuring relevancy and being fluid and changing within their context.

This requires a significant amount of understanding within the organization gained by awareness and humility. It means that organizations must be more focused on continually learning as they go, in order to remain flexible and to constantly improve. Using evaluation as a learning tool for organizations to become more responsive and more resilient can lead to greater stability and sustainability. Within my interest group, we discussed the various elements of the spectrum of evaluation, from specific methods to participation, all leading to greater sustainability. It was valuable to hear from my other groups members, even though they were exploring different areas of evaluation, because sustainable evaluation is linked to every step

along the process. The group process allowed us to have more in-depth discussion about each of the specific areas of evaluation we were interested in, with each person's own exploration informing that of the others. I had never thought of evaluation as such a transformative process but rather just a necessary step. I was also surprised to learn of the many different facets of evaluation and the various considerations that must be made during the process. It can be a complex process, but in the end, contributes greatly to the validity and growth of the program.

We are witnessing evaluation shift from its singular purpose as a tool for funding to a tool for learning and making continual adjustments for greater effectiveness. As Mizell (2005) stated in regards to the changes in evaluation and sustainability, "increasingly, sustainability is linked with doing 'what works'…and discontinuing programs that don't achieve their goals." This translates to more careful and selective utilization of resources. It also means that organizations are making decisions regarding programming based on actual results and effectiveness instead of emotional attachment or unsupported assumptions of success. The evaluation process requires regular, critical reflection which can be systematized through evaluative processes implemented into the plans for the organization and its programs. This learning-based focus streamlines the programming process, helping organizations be more effective in the long run. I wonder if this then continues to increase program viability and organizational strength, keeping them alive longer, continually increasing competition and raising the bar even more for what a successful arts organization looks like.

In order for an organization to genuinely learn through evaluation, the evaluative process must be embedded at the very start and all throughout organizational and program plans. While this made sense to me from the beginning of the course, it was an important moment when I realized that evaluation was more than just a tool. It was a process, a way of thinking and a way

of learning. In my groups we often discussed how evaluation should be embedded into an organization. It becomes a frame of mind. It parallels the actual program planning process, and is not something that it just tacked on at the end. This allows organizations to make adjustments in between measurements and data collection, continually tweaking and improving upon their work. Changes might include such things as adjusting programs strategies, fine-tuning data collection and adjusting funding levels. It is this repetitive process of evaluation and adjustment that feeds back into itself and links evaluation to sustainability if repeated over time (Mizell, 2005).

This change in the role and purpose of evaluation brings with it a few challenges. Firstly, implementing evaluation throughout the planning process requires that at least one person be actively cognizant of the role evaluation plays and ensures that the organization actually follows through. Good evaluation requires discipline and continued management. Instead of being a one-time survey or discussion, this sort of evaluation requires administrators to come up with a wider range of methods to use for collecting evaluative feedback throughout the course of the process. We often discussed methodology and how various evaluative methods can be used collectively to demonstrate impact in a way that combines quantitative and qualitative data. Administrators and evaluators can be more creative in collecting data and have a greater opportunity to tie evaluation in with the programming rather than adding it on as an afterthought. There might even be the opportunity to use evaluation as part of the programming, helping participants gain stewardship over the program and creatively provide feedback. Organizations also may be hesitant to be critical of their operations. Within our group discussions we sometimes talked about this hesitancy, especially when it comes to work done by others, but evaluation must be done equitably in good faith with everyone involved.

Just as important as collecting data is interpreting, finalizing and distributing the results. There should be a plan in place for how the collected data will be analyzed and this plan should be included at the beginning within the program plan. Looking for commonalities and differences will help distinguish patterns (YouthARTS, 2015). A plan for developing the final evaluation report should be built into the program plan, outlining what is in the report, what it should end up looking like, and when it should be created. This should also outline how it should be distributed. One very valuable piece of advice recommended that "instead of offering a numerical approach to how many people participated, describe the result by how much changed (rather than 200 children participated in an after-school dance program, state how many children learned to hip-hop dance (Hartsough, 2015)." Data like this helps tell the story of what really happened or what the impact really was. The final report is more than just a collection of data, facts and observations. It is a story describing the real impact of a program and should therefore might include photographs, video, and narrative when appropriate. Using all of this information, a good evaluation identifies program or organizational strengths and weaknesses, key findings and then makes recommendations for the future that can be implemented with the support of key stakeholders (Mizell, 2005). The evaluation results must be summarized and presented in such a way as to be clear, understandable and easily communicated to others.

No evaluation would be complete without actually doing something with the findings. Evaluation does not serve much of a purpose if it is not actually utilized. Organizations should be prepared to present evaluation findings in different formats and specificity depending on the audience to whom they are being presented. Findings could potentially be formatted into formal written reports for funders, administrators or key stakeholders, digital presentations delivered in front of an audience, verbal presentations for community meetings or board meetings as well as

other methods of communication. It was suggested that it is helpful to actually contact funding

agencies to find out if they have requirements or preferences.

Beyond presenting findings to stakeholders and affected community, it seems to be a

good idea to consider disseminating evaluation findings and lessons learned out to wider

audiences through press releases, newspaper articles, the internet or other media. It can be useful

for publicizing programs within the community as well as for keeping stakeholders informed

who need to be aware of evaluation efforts within the organization. Evaluations can demonstrate

growth, professionalism and seriousness within the program or organization, so this is not only

helpful from a branding perspective but also to legitimize the organization or program in the

minds of the general public. It also tells participants that their feedback was valuable and that it

is actually be utilized to better the program, making them more likely to participate in future

evaluative processes. Findings might be used to make adjustments to an existing program, make

management or administrative changes, influence policy, add to existing knowledge or even to

undertake a new evaluation effort (Mizell, 2005).

Evaluation reports could potentially contain main summaries, methods, conclusions, and

recommendations. Within the report one might ask what they learned, how might they use this to

improve their program, what are strengths and weaknesses, what are key findings and what

recommendations can be make for the future, keeping in mind that this should be realistic.

Recommendations need to be actionable. There seem to be too many instances of conducting

evaluation but not implementing changes. This is likely due to the organization's purpose of

conducting the evaluation in the first place. If they aren't looking at it as a learning opportunity,

but simply as a mandatory part of the process, then they are less likely to actually figure out how

to use the evaluation as a catalyst for positive change and growth.

One thing for programs to consider who may have access to resources for evaluation, is the possibility of conducting a follow-up evaluation. This entails collecting follow-up data in order to better understand the long term effects of programming. This is often the impact that really matters but is difficult to measure. Evidence of long term, positive outcomes can really validate the organization, giving valuable credibility and paving the way for funding. Few evaluation studies actually include follow-up because of the additional work necessary. It requires that the organization maintain communication and continue to collect data from their participants (Mizell, 2005). This is not necessarily feasible for organizations with limited staff and resources, but it may prove very worthwhile if it can be managed. The evaluation process itself requires dedication and commitment to learning, but it is integral to making the organization and programs responsive to context, resilient to challenges, adaptable to change, and in the end more sustainable overall.

References

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