Reframing the Position of the Evaluator

Abstract Chapter 5 defines two partnership types that can be utilized by evaluators and which explores the positioning of the evaluator. It will make recommendations on which partnership type is more effective in a participatory evaluation model. The chapter will investigate the two positions most often adopted by researchers/evaluators – external and distanced or embedded and collaborative – and will argue the merits and deficiencies of the two approaches. The chapter also discusses how the embedded and collaborative approach can be aligned with the notion of co-production of research.

Keywords Co-production of research · Participatory evaluation · Partnership

Chapter 5 looks at partnership types and adopts Remer's (1996) binary of administrative partnerships, or instructional partnerships, to understand the relationships and functions that an evaluator can establish with an arts organization. The chapter breaks these two types down further into functional positions that an evaluator may adopt, either in an external and distanced viewpoint or in an embedded and collaborative viewpoint to undertake the evaluation, and outlines the benefits and challenges of both positions.

Delivering an arts programme is a complex undertaking, not least because of the range of partners – government bodies, peak arts bodies,

arts managers, artists, and researchers – with a stake in such programmes. Within this complex undertaking, tensions can arise not just between arts and administrative business but between a range of competing artistic, social, educational, and economic agendas among partners, as well as the people these partners must report to about the programme's performance. While relations between delivery partners for arts events and programmes need to be negotiated carefully at all stages – initiation, planning, implementation, the presentation of the event, exhibition, or programme itself, and the evaluation thereof – this is particularly true in the evaluation stage as partners try to create a picture of the impact of their programme. This chapter discusses the partnership types that may be activated in agreements between arts organizations and researchers when evaluating arts and cultural programmes, and deliberates on the research approach and researcher positioning that an evaluator may activate during the course of the investigation.

Each arts project, and the arts sector as a whole, is a complex ecology in which artists, arts organizations, community, corporations, and governments all need to work together to ensure the maximum impact of the work. Effective partnerships within this ecology are critical not just in the initiation, planning, and implementation phases of an arts project, but in the evaluation phase, in which partners need to work together to generate good data about which of their actions enabled or failed to enable an anticipated impact. Indeed, effective partnerships are perhaps most important in the evaluation phase, as each partner confronts the need not just to consider the strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement in their work but to share this with other delivery partners to support their own consideration of their strengths and weaknesses.

Partnerships Types

According to Remer (1996), there are two types of partnership that can be applied in an arts context. Remer's premise is based on her experience in the field of arts education. The partnership constructions she outlines are effective in understanding the possible arrangements made between researchers and arts organizations for programme or event evaluation function at a macro level. Remer defines two main categories of partnership – instructional and administrative. Instructional partnerships are concerned with the design, organization, content, and methodologies of an experience. This partnership is a learning paradigm and is focused on an

assessment of what the learner, in this case, an arts organization and its employees, apprehends, and comprehends what they able to do as a result of engaging in the partnership. Administrative partnerships are seen as institutional collaborations, and are perhaps more perfunctory in nature. They address issues of organization, design, co-ordination, governance, clarification of roles and responsibilities of the stakeholders, and overall programme effectiveness.

Both the instructional and administrative partnership modes have common features, and, as Remer says, the most common shared feature is that '[t]hey depend on people, require flexibility, are labour intensive, dynamic and interactive' (Remer, 1996, p. 115). In reality, the instructional and administrative aspects of partnerships are not isolated phenomena; they are two modes in which the roles and functions of the people within the partnership process frequently overlap. Using my own experience as a touchstone, there are generally two main ontological positions that an evaluator can adopt within a partnership, be it an instructional or an administrative one. I classify these as being either (a.) an external and distanced approach or (b.) an embedded and collaborative approach.

The external and distanced approach is an arms-length approach to both the research design and the reporting process. Such an approach frequently uses quantitative data collection tools, such as post-event online surveys, and rarely enters into the same space as the arts project participants or audiences. In the initial stages of consultation with the commissioning arts organization, the evaluator makes an attempt to understand the nature of the arts organization, the nature and scale of the arts event, and other factors that may be useful to develop an evaluation strategy. However, as a result of the evaluator's external and distanced position, the arts organization may be hesitant to share too much information, in case, as it may be used in a negative way in the final report. In some cases, arts projects and cultural institutions will provide:

- A list of generalized key performance indicators rather than clear expectations about what sort of evaluation data they want, how they want it, when they want it, and what they will do with it
- A predetermined definition of value and predetermined data on value
- Data gathered by artists or arts marketers days, months, or years after a project, and, in some cases, already collated into trends and statistics, with selected quotes.

With this limited information, the evaluator designs the research approach and data collection tools based on brief consultation with the arts organization and contacts evaluation participants, such as audience members or project participants, through electronic correspondence and online surveys. If the budget allows, they may send research assistants into the field, but the evaluator who meets with the client arts organization often does not participate in direct data collection. The data are then collated in quantifiable terms of graphs and percentages, with some supporting narrative. To augment, or perhaps to justify the findings, the evaluator will include some extended survey responses in which the research participants had the opportunity to elaborate on the rating on a Likert scale. The report is then tabled to the organization to work through and to respond to as they see fit. This approach falls into the administrative partnership type. While this approach provides data about outcomes, it may be seen as being surface level and something that does not really capture the effects of the arts-based experience on communities, individuals, and the arts organization itself.

One reaction to this is to produce better evidence – not just data, but knowledge that people can act on (Holden, 2004, p. 19). Knowledge, by nature, is a transactional activity, and the way one begins to understand the world or the nature of an event is through direct encounter. So, it makes sense that delivering knowledge about value and impact of an arts event through a written report alone is not going to affect change or develop thought that leads to new approaches.

In contrast, in an embedded and collaborative approach, the evaluator is embedded inside the investigation, just as war correspondents are embedded with troops at the front line of a military conflict to gain first-hand experience. It also challenges what Eisner (2002) says is the mistaken 'assumption that assessment and evaluation must focus on the results of a process and not on the process itself' (p. 180).

While the evaluator using an embedded and collaborative approach should be careful to either state their subjectivity within the study or put in place measures to mitigate it, this approach is more responsive to changing dynamics within the partnership and allows the evaluator to be more adroit. The embedded and collaborative position is an instructional partnership as it generates a learning community comprising the evaluator, fellow researchers, key stakeholders, staff or board members of the commissioning arts organization, and audiences or participants of the arts experience. This type of relationship tempers the trend of the victory

narrative, as discussed in a previous section of this text, as the primary audience for the report is the commissioning arts organization, but it is also understood that the report may also be of interest to other Australian performing arts companies and artists, cultural agencies, policymakers, and researchers who seek a deeper understanding of the value and impact of arts-based engagements. Based on first-hand experience and commissioning body feedback, I believe that the embedded and collaborative evaluation approach is the more successful of the two evaluation strategies. It allows the research and the evaluative report to be placed within a natural process of project development rather than as an end of process requirement that is developed in the administrative partnership. This is particularly so with longitudinal evaluations that allow the researcher to engage in generative conversations throughout the life of the project. The researcher can then become a change agent and a disruptive innovator with the project and perhaps even the arts organization.