Looking out and Looking In: Ethnographic Evaluation as a Two-Way Mirror
Assessing the Practices of Public Scholarship

There is growing pressure to provide concrete evidence of impact to funders and institutional and civic leaders. And yet, numbers and metrics rarely capture the complex individual transformation and collective social change at the heart of many impactful community-based arts and humanities-based endeavors. Stories and qualitative data more readily meet the challenge but are often viewed as “soft” evidence. How can we reap the valuable content- and context-rich learning that qualitative approaches to assessment afford, while enhancing the credibility of qualitative evidence toward more effective case making?

This story of evaluation describes how the Tucson Pima Arts Council (TPAC) worked with researcher Maribel Alvarez, PhD, at the Southwest Center, University of Arizona/Tucson to address this question. They tested an ethnographic approach to better understand the effects of TPAC’s arts and civic engagement grant making on community members involved in funded projects, applying systematic rigor to lend greater credibility to qualitative data and analysis.

TPAC and Alvarez focused on the Finding Voice project, an ongoing project that helps refugee and immigrant youth—through research, photography, and writing—to develop a better understanding of their Tucson neighborhood and U.S. culture, and to voice their opinions and ideas at a community level about issues that matter to them. Learn about evaluation methods employed, including collaborating with youth in designing and implementing evaluation, and insights TPAC gained about the impact on the youth and larger community (the mirror reflecting out). Also learn how TPAC came to see itself in a new light (the mirror looking in) regarding its role in evaluation and as an agency promoting civic engagement in the community.

Stories and Numbers to Make the Case: Tucson Pima Arts Council and University Researchers Explore Ethnographic and Quantitative Approaches to Assessment of Civic Engagement through Arts & Culture

Introduction

Two companion case studies share project and institutional level learning resulting from “collaborative inquiries” between the Tucson Pima Arts Council (TPAC), a publicly supported arts commission serving Tucson and Pima County in Arizona, and researchers and evaluators at the University of Arizona/Tucson and the University of Pennsylvania’s Social Impact of the Arts Project (SIAP). The purpose underpinning these inquiries was twofold: to help TPAC better understand community level effects of its arts and civic engagement grant making and overall
agency work; and to re-conceptualize this local arts agency’s role in and approach to assessing the civic impact of its work primarily toward more effective case making with civic leaders and funders.

Both inquiries were implemented between 2008 and 2009 as part of the Arts & Civic Engagement IMPACT Initiative implemented by Animating Democracy, a program of Americans for the Arts. The initiative aims to advance understanding of and to help make the case for the social efficacy of arts-based civic engagement work [1]. The Tucson Pima Arts Council participated in the initiative’s Field Lab, which paired evaluators with cultural organizations or programs to help organization leaders learn how in the future they could implement assessment that would be meaningful and useful to understanding social impact and improving practice. These exchanges over several months aimed to promote mutual learning (with evaluators gaining sensibilities in arts and civic engagement work) and resulted in case studies to support the interests of others wanting to know how to assess arts and civic engagement work for its social outcomes.

Leia Maas, grants manager for the Tucson Pima Arts Council, worked with Maribel Alvarez, ethnographer, faculty and director of the Southwest Center, University of Arizona, Tucson, around the community effects of the ongoing program Finding Voice, supported by TPAC with grant funding. Maas and TPAC executive director Roberto Bedoyo also worked with Mark Stern of the Social Impact of the Arts Project at the University of Pennsylvania related to the broader civic impact of TPAC’s work as an agency looking to contribute to the community’s civic and social well being. The primary “audiences” for these evaluation inquiries were TPAC leaders themselves, and secondarily local civic leaders and funders as well as national funders. Animating Democracy’s intended audiences were arts and civic engagement practitioners and evaluators. Both case studies are offered here via links to Animating Democracy’s IMPACT web site.


The following summary focuses on the case study, “Two-Way Mirror: Ethnography as a Way to Assess Civic Impact of Arts-based Engagement in Tucson, Arizona,” by Maribel Alvarez. This study explicates how principles and practices of ethnography can be applied as qualitative evaluation strategies to better understand the social and civic effects of the Finding Voice program, which TPAC has supported through one of its funding programs. Alvarez’s work helps to substantiate the value of qualitative design research and analysis as well as the important
contributions the field of ethnography has to offer. Though there is considerable pressure to rely upon quantitative strategies and metrics in order to present “hard data” to funders and civic leaders, this story underscores the significant manner qualitative data can lead to the analysis of a different level and kind of community impact. The specific methodologies and practical tools employed by the ethnographic researchers in this project helped the arts council understand that “things were actually working” by providing concrete information about the impact. The Finding Voice project was having in the lives of specific individuals and communities. Two relevant sections from this case study, “How Finding Voice Utilized the Ethnographic Approach to Evaluation” (page 7), and “Guidelines for Conducting Fieldwork” (page 15), can be found at the end of this summary.


Description

Finding Voice is an ongoing project developed by Josh Schacter (Tucson based photographer, educator, and cultural activist) and Julie Kasper (ESL/English Teacher, Catalina Magnet High School) to help refugee and immigrant youth develop literacy and second language skills by researching, photographing, and writing about critical social issues in their lives and communities. Their work has explored personal experiences with health, war, and immigration. Through the creative process and by engaging with each other and in community dialogue, the program also aims to help young people develop a better understanding of their Tucson neighborhood and U.S. culture, and build a strong connection to their culture and families. Specifically, the goals are to encourage and support youth voices from all groups—with special emphasis on the majority of youth who do not currently voice their opinions and ideas at a community level—and to increase the number of youth in decision-making roles. The creative work has been exhibited widely in the community, including on bus shelters throughout the city and in the Vice-Mayor’s office. Finding Voice creates community forums where young people share their stories and even facilitate public conversations about issues and concerns. Their work was exhibited in the U.S. Senate building, where six of the young artists shared their views on immigration policy at a Congressional briefing in 2009.
The Evaluation Inquiry

The evaluation process described in Alvarez’s case study involved two interrelated but substantially distinct inquiries. One inquiry concerned measuring the impact of the Finding Voice project in and of itself as an arts-based example of civic engagement. A second inquiry—hard to separate from the rich content base of Finding Voice, yet different in the kinds of questions it posed of the project—concerned the organizational dynamics, protocols, and mechanics of TPAC, which saw in Finding Voice a model for how to advance its own organizational work in a direction more compatible with the goals of civic engagement.

Key to TPAC’s role as an agency accountable to the public is its need to capture data that measures the impact of its programs to the community. The need for understanding the impact of participating in an arts-based civic engagement project quickly raises the bar on evaluation and must move beyond tabulating numbers served and artworks created to a documentation of “stories of transformation” and “narratives of meaning making.” In their collaborative inquiry, TPAC and ethnographer and evaluator Maribel Alvarez chose ethnographic approaches because of their value in revealing what is “really important to people” and how they see themselves in relationship to systems, programs, and policies that affect them. Ethnographic approaches are attentive to context, and substantially more complex and emotive than what can typically be captured by quantitative surveys. Toward this end, together they defined clear and feasible community-level outcomes for the Finding Voices project and then qualitative evaluation strategies to better understand these community effects.

Finding Voice represented a model for what could happen if more of TPAC’s funding and organizational mechanics could be aligned to support the kinds of social questions that Finding Voice addressed. In other words, TPAC hoped to translate what it learned at this micro project level across its grant making so that it could gain a cumulative sense of the social effects of its grant making and make a better case for the arts as a civic engagement strategy. To do this would require a change in basic assumptions about (a) who should evaluate whom; (b) what constitutes good data; and (c) how information is shared with key stakeholders. This re-conceptualization involved the following elements:
1. an expanded role for the TPAC program manager as an observer-participant invested in an ongoing dialogue with the artist, teacher, youth, public officials, and the public;
2. an active and sustained opportunity for program participants themselves (for instance, the youth) to reflect on the impact of the program;
3. the validation of stories and detailed subjective accounts of events and experiences, open-ended interviews, blogs, public art, and public happenings (all part of creative uses of media and qualitative data) as sources of evaluation data; and
4. a commitment to create an open portal for sharing evaluation information with the public at large in a deliberative and non-didactic, non-traditional grantspeak fashion (as evidenced in the related website ARTivism).

TPAC implemented a primarily qualitative methodology of gathering stories as the research unit that measured success. The “Two-Way Mirror” case study describes how The Finding Voice project utilized a diversity of standard methods (surveys, focus groups, counting) to gauge effects on participants. Discourse strategies included: community forums where youth spoke of their experiences; a blog where youth recorded testimonies and reflections; public talks and discussions in conjunction with the exhibits, and dialogue with politicians, policy makers, and non-governmental organizations through meetings, congressional hearings, etc. It also offers guidelines for conducting fieldwork. It also describes how TPAC employed a systematic ethnographic approach to collect and interpret qualitative data to enhance the credibility of evidence about civic outcomes.

The combination of ethnographic methods over a period of nine months contributed to TPAC’s conclusion that the impact of the Finding Voice project resided primarily in the sense of purpose and citizenship that it fostered in the youth and the tight tapestry of social exchanges and points of contact that the project wove among various sectors in the local arts ecology.

Generativity, Rigor, Collaboration

TPAC is a learning organization. Staff set out to apply what they could learn from an ethnographic approach to assessing the Finding Voice project with the larger goal to advance TPAC’s own organizational work in a direction more compatible with the goals of civic engagement. In other words, TPAC valued assessment for its generative potential to inform its own practices as a grant making organization. The ethnographic model staff favored stressed what Maribel Alvarez described as “a model of sociability that lets you learn as you do, think as you practice, gather data as you hang out, and analyze things in terms of stories shared among co-narrators.” TPAC staff took to heart recommendations made by both Alvarez and Stern to inform the bigger policy making picture.

A motivating purpose for evaluation is case making to Tucson civic leaders as well as external private funders who support TPAC. Therefore, establishing a level of rigor in collecting and
analyzing qualitative data to ensure credible evidence was an explicit intention of the assessment approach. Efforts focused on basic skills in coding and quantifying qualitative data.

The Finding Voice project had many stakeholders and the overall approach to assessment has been one of participatory evaluation. Beyond TPAC’s own interests, the lead artist, Magnet School coordinator, local private funders, and participating youth worked in collaboration to define meaningful measures of success. Young people have actively implemented evaluation strategies and interpreted results. The participatory ethic has also validated the role of the project manager as an active participant in observation and analysis as well as coordination of evaluation activities.

As the arts council has shifted to more qualitative reporting from grantees, staff is seeing that grantees appreciate the opportunity to tell an honest story of the effects of their work. “We’ve managed to create a culture of ethnographic story telling,” observes Leia Maas. For TPAC, however, analyzing and potentially aggregating so much qualitative information has not been entirely practicable. “Now we’re looking at how we analyze that information,” says Maas. “What can we manage without being a major research institute?” TPAC is considering how it might establish even more of a relationship with the University of Arizona to collect and analyze data over years.

**Lessons Learned About Assessment**

The Finding Voice project challenged TPAC’s understanding of its own role in the larger arts ecology of Southern Arizona. In lieu of the conventional notion of an arts council serving as a hub that processes cultural grants and that through an allocations model ensures the healthy development of the arts sector, the idea of the agency functioning instead as a node within a network of animated social relationships gained currency. In a node model, the main product that TPAC produces is relationships. Thus, the success of a project like Finding Voice depends on the active buy-in (in both execution and evaluation) of the youth participants, artist and teacher, the school district, the refugee agency, two local private foundations, City Council members, and the public that reacts to the work.

The Finding Voice case study provided solid evidence that it was possible to reshape the role of the grants manager to one of partnership and catalytic agent.
It also made convincingly clear that an arts agency can leverage triple or quadruple its limited financial resources by building relationships in nodal fashion.

The results gleaned from TPAC’s systematic, ethnographic approach to evaluation in the Finding Voice case study underscored the value of qualitative research, revealing that compelling narrative of impact drawn from rigorously collected and analyzed qualitative data is effective in making the case for arts-based civic engagement to civic leaders and funders. Story can provide evidence of what the anatomy of a strong arts-based civic engagement project looks like and can support arguments that reach both hearts and minds. TPAC also had to contend with the fact that its collaboration with Finding Voice was only a small part of its overall scope of work and mandate. In some ways, the case study approach contributed to the singularity and exceptionalism of the Finding Voice experience. Hence, the question remained: How can the “ethos of practice” of Finding Voice be replicated?

To understand the community impact of their work further, TPAC invited Mark J. Stern and Susan C. Seifert of the Social Impact of the Arts Project, University of Pennsylvania to recommend reasonable quantitative measures they could employ to provide a wider institution-level view of the civic engagement effects of their work as an agency. The lessons learned from this primarily quantitative assessment study, “Documenting Civic Engagement: A Plan for the Tucson Pima Arts Council,” will be summarized and posted on this site in the future, demonstrating the way TPAC has been informed by and is continuing to evolve its assessment work.

**Reflections on the Ethnographic Approach to Assessment**

When asked to reflect on the *practicability* of the Ethnographic Assessment Approach as employed by TPAC in this study, Leia Maahs, Community Cultural Development Manager, stated:

“The practicability of Ethnographic Assessment Approach as Dr. Alvarez reminds us, in Two Way Mirror is challenging for a small to mid-sized local arts agency, however we are following this model and proposing new tools that “ask direct questions” to assess the “point of view” of our project grantees (pp. 13). “Being there” and “Being with” are two of the most challenging aspects of the ethnographic method and for us the question is always, how to support the human resources necessary for work in the “field” especially in a time when the
non-profit sector is currently being asked to do more with less as a result of the economic downturn.”

“Therefore applying ethnographic methods into the PLACE Initiative evaluation portfolio at this time are being developed with the recommendations made by Dr. Alvarez while taking into consideration the challenges posed by our own organizational capacity. We are currently developing what we might consider a hybrid approach to ethnographic evaluation. This is working research and can be shared broadly upon completion January 2014.”

Two relevant sections from the Two-Way Mirror article offer useful practical items: “How Finding Voice Utilized the Ethnographic Approach to Evaluation,” (page 7), and “Guidelines for Conducting Fieldwork,” (page 15).

**Didactic versus Discursive Communication**

Essential to the success of the ethnographic approach is the development of a culture that is embracing the ethnographic model of telling stories and being comfortable with discursive as opposed to didactic forms of communication. Here, Leia Maahs describes TPAC’s intentional efforts to engage in deliberative dialogue and discursive forms of communication:

“The power of story informs how we as an agency tell our larger narrative about the impact of art in transforming the social and civic landscape of our community. Story informs how we as an intermediary build relationships and the context in which we develop policy for grant making and services. As a local arts agency it is implicate that we listen to our constituency and the concerns or aspirations of our community and it is in that experience of listening that we are making an intentional effort to engage in discursive forms of communication. The challenges associated with applying ethnographic methods of qualitative data gathering and analysis are two fold- we have to be willing to take risks and pay attention to what access or barriers we create as funders holistically, the rigor we bring to our process of grant making in the development of guidelines, policy or assessment must be porous enough to allow our constituency with the opportunity to tell their story from multiple worldviews. At one point a couple years ago our grants committee in efforts to increase our rigor and efficiency radically changed the value of narrative in our major grant cycle, as a result applicants were not able to “tell their story” and in efforts to make a process better we effectively created barriers. We also have to maintain an ethical culture of engagement. Informed by local cultural practice and prompted by best practices in the field at large. TPAC has to ask its grantees, on a regular basis, how we can best support local practitioners as change agents and creative placemakers? This requires consistent community development work and does not begin or end with great research. Our efforts to prompt the notion of cultural stewardship and deliberative democratic discourse as a public funder have opened a broader dialogue among agencies, cultural organizations and leaders. What we bring to the table is an invitation to engage in discourse...
about what is authentic and distinctive about our region or what are the assets or what is at risk if they are not supported in ethical ways. We are strategic about making that invitation broad, iterative and mindful of the diverse experiences each demographic in our region bring to the table- how you make the invitation and what you demonstrate dictates how you engage in discursive discourse. TPAC has found that by privileging story- and deliberative dialogue we are able to understand the tensions of the work we support which then informs how we develop assessment or policy.”

[1] The initiative aims to advance these goals: (a) **Coalesce knowledge and advance learning** about how to assess and communicate the social change impact of arts-based civic engagement; (b) **Strengthen the capacity of practitioners** to assess and describe social change outcomes by equipping the field with practical knowledge and useful/usable tools and models to measure and communicate the social change impact of arts-based civic engagement; and (c) **Position the arts** as valid and viable contributors to civic engagement and the achievement of social change by developing compelling communication strategies. Toward these goals, the Animating Democracy staff worked closely with a small group of consultants on the Initiative who helped to: refine a shared agenda for the initiative; collect and make meaning of extant literature and resources; translate findings into useful frameworks and tools for practitioners; assess what is needed for effective case making; and disseminate resources to potential users. It was initially funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.