

High Points from
the Los Angeles
Evaluators Circle

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**Animating
Democracy**

A Program of **Americans for the Arts**



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Animating Democracy held its second Evaluators Circle (E-Circle) at the Japanese American Cultural & Community Center, inviting Los Angeles-based cultural leaders, researchers, and evaluators to share evaluation projects, findings and learning. It was a rich and hearty exchange. With support from the Nathan Cummings Foundation and help in organizing from Kamella Tate, independent evaluator and former director of research and evaluation at The Music Center of Los Angeles County, our L.A. Evaluators Circle offered an opportunity to explore ways that data analysis and evaluation are informing decision making with an emphasis on cultural equity as a social justice goal.

Participants

Wendy Hsu, researcher, strategist, and educator, ethnographer; recent ACLS public fellow with the City of Los Angeles Dept. of Cultural Affairs

Sofia Klatzker, executive director, Arts for LA

Susannah Laramée Kidd, research analyst and ACLS public fellow, Los Angeles County Arts Commission

Bronwyn Mauldin, director of research & evaluation, Los Angeles County Arts Commission

Angie Kim, executive director, Center for Cultural Innovation

Kamella Tate, KTA/LLC

Patti Topete, director of programs, Levitt Pavilions

Matty Wilder, senior program officer, Herb Alpert Foundation

Sharon Yazowski, executive director, Levitt Pavilions

Courtney Malloy, director of research, Vital Research

Barbara Schaffer Bacon, co-director, Animating Democracy/Americans for the Arts

Pam Korza, co-director, Animating Democracy/Americans for the Arts

Randy Cohen, vice president of research and policy, Americans for the Arts

Embedding Researchers and Evaluators in Local Arts Agencies

Local arts agencies are blazing trails by making an organizational commitment to embedding researchers in their organizations. The Los Angeles County Arts Commission (LACAC) has invested in internal research and evaluation expertise with a four-member team, including full-time staff and currently an ACLS (American Council of Learned Societies) Public Fellow. At the City of Los Angeles Dept. of Cultural Affairs (DCA) an ACLS Public Fellow's work supported staff development and thinking outside conventional frameworks. In San Francisco, ACLS Public Fellow Anh Thang Dao-Shah conducted analysis of the Arts Commission's Cultural Equity grants that provided the underpinning for significant program revisions. While the San Francisco Arts Commission was not represented at this meeting, the two L.A. agencies' stories illuminated the value of making research and evaluation a priority as both agencies work toward equity and social change goals.

“Playing with data can lead to new questions and thinking.”

Through her ACLS Public Fellowship at the Dept. of Cultural Affairs, Wendy Hsu described how she used *rapid processing* approaches and a *discovery* mindset (likening herself to a research plumber a la Mario Bros.!) to mine extant agency data about public art and grantmaking. She mapped by district public artworks and organizations receiving grant dollars, enabling staff to immediately visualize areas of concentration as well as gaps regarding where DCA resources are going and not going. Sofia Klatzker, with Arts for LA pointed out how a similar data analysis at the county arts commission when she worked there revealed that some regions within the County have few cultural organizations. Recognizing uneven access to the arts across the County, the LA County Board of Supervisors developed a new program that funds social service organizations that incorporate high quality arts programming into their work.

Hsu tapped Instagram to begin to better understand people's experiences of public art, using as data photos taken at Watts Tower over a nine-month period as well as narrative posted with them. Photo and hashtag analysis showed a range of different sensory experiences regarding what people visually tune into about Watts Towers and surroundings. Text mining and analyzing frequency of words used began to reveal who is visiting the towers (residents, tourists, artists, etc.) and suggested the possibility of charting emotional response as well as how people relate their experience of the towers to topics, such as race.

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Viewing local arts agencies as “stewards of arts and culture data,” Hsu described data collection and analysis as *assessment* and information for *speculating and strategizing*. Datathons are one way she

has worked with community organizers and others in other contexts to understand the economic and social realities in a neighborhood, for example loaning practices, transportation needs and use.

Through investigatory uses of data, Hsu helped DCA “to raise further questions about what we don’t already know about the social and cultural reality of the communities that we serve” and implications regarding cultural equity and social outcomes.

Data in search of a question

When is data about discovery and when is it responding to a specific question? Participants underscored the critical importance of purposefulness in research and evaluation efforts, even when the intention is “exploration or discovery.” Courtney Malloy of Vital Research observed the phenomenon of “data in search of a question,” i.e. the often unfocused collection of data without a clear direction or purpose. “Data doesn’t magically talk to us,” Kamella Tate of KTA/LLC concurred. “Data – and data analysts – wait for someone to ask questions. They will sit there forever, patiently, waiting.” For example, data about drop-out rates will tell different stories depending on *what* you want to know and how you need or want to use the information (context of when, where, in relation to what). E-Circle participants raised caution flags when evaluation efforts are not anchored in a rigorous process of asking and answering why and for whom evaluation is being done and what is the focus of the inquiry.

Bias in data collection...something funky going on

Owned and operated by LA County, the Ford Theatres have the mission to “be a world-class community performing arts center that celebrates and reflects the diversity of the people of Los Angeles.” The Theatres regularly survey audiences for demographic and other data in order to answer the question “Are we serving the breadth of L.A. County?” LACAC’s director of research and evaluation Bronwyn Mauldin noted when she joined the team that the methodology they were using might not provide a representative sample of audiences attending events. In addition, a rather extensive form with 13 questions may have deterred many from completing the survey.

With advice from the firm Slover Linett, LACAC changed the sampling frame (a mix of purposive sampling of shows and random sampling of audiences per show) and the way they ask questions to lessen the influence of bias and also developed a simplified, lively, accessible survey form. Instead of using ushers who were busy and distracted from the survey task by other duties, they hired and trained staff to administer the surveys. They also eliminated the administration of email surveys to individuals who ordered tickets online.

These changes appear to have improved the agency’s understanding of who is participating in Ford Theatres’ events, showing that people of color may be a larger percentage of Ford Theatres’ audi-

ences (70.8%) than previous nonrandomized surveys showed (51.3%). LACAC is working to further refine their protocols for use in other settings, including non-ticketed public engagement events. Mauldin observes the conversation at Ford Theatres shifting from *community engagement* to *cultural equity*, which is a move from talking about *process* to talking about *goals*. The more rigorous approach to audience surveying occurred in the context of Ford staff looking at how they are engaging diverse communities and supporting the kinds of diverse cultural organizations that typically don't have access to larger venues. Increased focus in these ways has served to deepen conversation about what cultural equity means. Ford staff are making intentional changes in the application process to ensure they are meeting the institution's goal of representing and serving the diversity of LA County.

“Dataturgy”

In considering the range of activities, tasks, skills, and processes both formal and informal evaluation can encompass, Kamella Tate offered a playful definition of what practitioners are actually doing (and need to know how to do) in the field. “Dataturgy,” like metallurgy or dramaturgy, includes the Greek “ourgia,” meaning “to work.” Dataturgy, then, is the science of data; their extraction from activities, settings, and experiences; their scrubbing, analyzing, synthesizing, and working. A dataturg is . . . a data worker!

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Thorny Issues

Inspired by a [blog by Sunil Iyengar](#), Director of Research & Analysis at the National Endowment for the Arts, Tate focused her Day 2 presentation on “thorny issues and challenging opportunities” in both evaluation and applied research in the arts and cultural policy. Here are just a few.

Exceptionalism in the arts. There is, some participants observed, a tendency in the arts field toward what Tate called “evangelical exceptionalism.” In relation to evaluation, this translates to the notion that the arts cannot be methodically assessed for impact because they embody qualities and effects that are perceived as impossible to measure. Courtney Malloy agreed with this observation and added that, when people in the arts reject the notion that the effects of their work can be assessed (whether quantitatively or qualitatively), it falls, in part, upon evaluators to demonstrate otherwise. This means listening and reflecting back to arts practitioners an understanding of the unique nature and the intangible effects of the work and to build evaluation approaches that capture such effects using both qualitative and quantitative data.

Credibility of evaluation processes and results. Here are some issues related to rigor and credibility examined by E-Circle participants:

- Evaluation scopes and project designs are way too broad.** It is not uncommon to see evaluation plans with too many variables that couldn't possibly all be measured, even if time and money were no object. Outcomes framed are often long term or at a higher level than a particular project could realistically achieve. Sometimes consultants are not rigorous enough at the outset to urge funders and practitioners to rein in the scope of evaluations which can cost upwards of six figures, said Angie Kim of the Center for Cultural Innovation. Practitioners and funders need to calibrate expectations of organizational or project/initiative outcomes as well as the scope of evaluation efforts within resources available.
- Empirical approaches often do not guide evaluation work plans.** As we look to make the case for the value added by and contributions of the arts to social change, it is important to be able to show the integrity of process (e.g. disclosure, replication, generalizability, data sharing), credibility of evaluation findings, and validity of inferences. Tate named several issues – e.g., incorrect directional hypotheses, small effect sizes, control vs. comparison groups, attribution bias – that are red flags for others who are scrutinizing our outcome claims. She cautioned, for example, that certain approaches such as appreciative inquiry, by virtue of its asset orientation, may leave out contrary cases or outliers.

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- Is there a fear of rigor?** Matty Wilder wondered whether there is also a fear among arts practitioners and leaders of what rigorous practice will reveal. Compared to the corporate sector where failure is expected as part and parcel of research and development, the arts sector has had to defend the value of arts in society for a long time. Fear of failure and defensiveness have become ingrained to an extent. Furthermore, as Tate pointed out, in the nonprofit cultural sector we don't have the resources to try and try again. The current fascination with "embracing failure" in education and technology is somewhat of a luxury for cultural workers – even though we all know artmaking itself is a "failing forward" process. Funders can be just as fearful to take risks funding projects where the outcomes are unknown or unproven, Sharon Yazowski, executive director of Levitt Pavilions added, and this can hinder new discoveries for social impact through the arts. Yazowski also added that creating a culture of evaluation can be challenging, as there can sometimes be tension between the funder requesting data to evaluate the program being funded and a grantee who states that evaluation places a burden on them. Funders should consider ways to support grantees' collection of data, such as providing tools and resources, including data analysis. Funders should also clearly communicate the purpose of evaluation and use data as a means to strengthen the grantee relationship and align objectives, as well as better understand the needs of the grantee to reach desired outcomes.

Little data in an era of BIG DATA. According to Wikipedia, big data is a broad term for data sets so large or complex that traditional data processing applications are inadequate. Tate underscored that “our role in big data is peripheral. Big data is characterized by high volume, super velocity, and almost infinite variety. Our big data is . . . little.” It may not be of benefit for nonprofit arts leaders to put a lot of energy into positioning themselves in relation to the current big data trend. At the same time, as arts leaders emphasize story as a potent “little” data source and communication vehicle for conveying outcomes, there are cautions here, too. Tate noted that narrative is not inherently more trustworthy than numbers – “the numbers” can be very important in evidencing social justice outcomes. Further, she said, it’s a difficult task to determine the credibility of qualitative data; therefore some level of skepticism is important. Susannah Laramée Kidd, Research Analyst / ACLS Public Fellow with LACAC, offered that evaluators and researcher can add to this conversation by begging questions regarding context and where the data come from. “We can add the methodological rigor and bring ethics and equity into the conversation.”

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Wendy Hsu urged researchers and evaluators to examine what role they need to play to ensure responsible and ethical sharing and use of data. “Big data is not just referring to the objective size of the data, it’s about the implication of truth. It’s an ideological position.” Hsu noted that the big data trend is impinging on public and private entities and on individuals. For example, Google asked for access to the Department of Cultural Affairs’ public art data to combine it with their own. Google and other corporate entities may act like they are using data in the public interest, she observed, but then sell it for market research or use it for other self-interests. Public agencies often have limited or no bargaining power at the same time they have public accountability. “What is our responsibility as government agencies to make meaningful insights. ...We need to be skeptical,” she urged.

In addition, Hsu sees related thorny issues in the realm of user generated data on social media. “There are kids practicing arts who don’t have any control over the use of their [online] images or how their data is framed.” Barbara Schaffer Bacon reflected on Hsu’s own Instagram example and raised what might be validity issues when organizations are both prompting stakeholders to use social media and then going back to this social media as evaluation evidence. Malloy and Tate both believe evaluation professionals (as well as data journalists) trained in methods and ethical standards of practice – as well as science and research literacy – can ensure integrity of working with user-generated data. They advised not to generalize about potentially unethical practices in the big data arena, noting that there are entities working ethically and for good causes that may be prospective partners for the arts.

What Will Move Evaluative Practice?

Leadership and increased capacity and resources are essential. Capacity building in evaluation will be important to build a robust culture of evidence among arts practitioners and funders. Moreover, participants observed that without compelling external pressure (from stakeholders such as funders and policy makers), most cultural practitioners would not go beyond day-to-day, informal uses of data for monitoring, assessing, and evaluating programs and organizations. They haven't internalized the value of measurement within ongoing practices; the requisite knowledge, skills, and understanding are not yet considered essential management competencies. (See "[Evaluating Impact/Appreciating Evaluation](#)," *Animating Democracy*, 2012) Building a culture of evaluation has to come from both ends; from practitioners who really care about their impact and who need skills and resources to assess that impact, and from organizational leaders like Laura Zucker at LACAC, Sharon Yazowski at Levitt Pavilions, and other funders who are helping to equip and resource those efforts by engaging (and reasonably compensating) research and evaluation professionals. (Watch for Levitt Pavilions' independent report on the progress of their ambitious evaluation initiative.)

The most pressing "challenging opportunity," though, continues to be: **How do we build measurement capacity and motivate evaluative thinking and practice?** The group spent the last minutes of the convening reflecting on possible entry points and strategies.

Develop more opportunities for training and technical assistance in evaluative thinking and practices. We can look to models from agencies that include:

- LA County Arts Commission: Since 2011, LACAC has been developing and offering technical assistance in evaluation and reporting. Grantees can gain measurement skills and knowledge while building confidence and generating a community conversation around evaluation.
- Pew Center for Arts and Heritage
- Southern California Grantmakers
- City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs
- National Guild for Community Arts Education

Evidence-based practice AND practice-based evidence. In our attempts to understand the outcomes of arts and social change work, we need to embrace definitions of emerging and promising practices. We may not yet have "best" practices. Practice-based methods and evidence allow for the uncontrolled, messy complexities of social change work and real-world contexts to be documented and measured *as the work occurs*, holistically attending to all outcomes and effects (positive or negative; expected or surprising; goal-oriented or goal-free; etc.). Additionally, meta-analyses – conducting research by critiquing and using extant research – may hold promise for arts researchers working with tremendous amounts of "small data" (see, for example, the excellent REAP study prepared by Hetland & Winner, 2000).

Resources and methods. Practitioners and funders need to know when to invest time and energy in evaluation and when not to do so. Not everything needs to be assessed even semi-formally. Informal noticing and documentation (which we should be doing anyway) is often enough. We also want to choose approaches that address questions and problems of practice. *Applied research* is closely related to *evaluation* but the two are not the same. They share design and data collection/analysis tools and methods (and expectations for scientific validity and reliability) but their purposes, audiences, questions, uses, standards, etc. are different. Often what evaluators see and are asked to implement is more akin to applied research than the assessment of value, worth, and significance, i.e. the “did it work and how can we get better?” questions of evaluation.

Tate has been investigating approaches and tools used in international aid and development, where social change work has been going on for decades. For example, [Most Significant Change](#) (Rick Davies, 1998); [Rapid Appraisal Processes](#) (Bamburger, 2006; Kumar, 1989); [Participatory Rapid Assessment Techniques](#) (Chambers, 1994); qualitative methods such as story-based understanding of value; and [causal chaining](#).

Use what we have already. This includes deriving in-depth knowledge of audiences, geographical saturation/representation, programmatic successes/failures, potential for joint ventures, etc. from service delivery data. Then, we must get over our fear of open data, of exchanging data between organizations and within networks. In ways sadly similar to that “most specially greedy, strong, and wicked worm,” Smaug the Magnificent, we hoard our treasure troves of information and knowledge. Share! Finally, other sectors and fields have much to offer us in terms of instruments, constructs, data management protocols, research designs, significant questions, and a host of other tools and ideas. A literature review is a beautiful thing. Every theory of change and logic model, every research or evaluation project, should begin with a review of existing literature on the topic. We may discover that our questions have already been answered, or we may discover extant methods and datasets we could use to make our data comparable to other practitioners in the field of arts and culture and elsewhere.

In Closing

The L.A. Evaluators Circle demonstrated the hunger for and value of peer exchange and building a cadre of connected professionals committed to the social impact of arts and culture and building a culture of evidence for the power of arts in social change work. We are excited to facilitate more exchange in the future!

If you would like to sponsor an Evaluators Circle on Arts & Social Change in your area, please contact Animating Democracy: agregory@artsusa.org.