Gaining New Ground:
Reflections on Research for the Field of Arts and Communities

Definitions: Research | Evaluation

In order to fulfil their true potential, Bill believes community arts programmes need to be constantly learning from the work as it happens in real time. And that is at the heart of the "research" work that he does at the Seattle-based Centre for the Study of Arts and Communities.

Research and evaluation share the same fuzzy borders in the realm of arts-based community development. There are times when artists and organisations want to know how well a programme was run (loosely termed "evaluation"). At other times, they want to know more precisely *what happens* during a programme (loosely referred to as "research"). In Bill's world, "community art-making operates in the realm of 'action research' where the *doing* AND the *learning about the doing* are almost always happening simultaneously." Whether it's "research" or "evaluation", this process of learning and discovery is aimed at benefitting the art-making, which in turn should benefit society or community.

The Pomegranate Story

To articulate the usefulness of research, Bill spoke of his work with the Pomegranate Centre, an organisation that was involved in creative place-making for 27 years.

A key objective of the Pomegranate Centre's work is bringing communities together to build "gathering places", which might take the form of a neighbourhood performance space, a playground or community garden. The central feature of the Pomegranate process is that these one-of-a-kind commons are designed and built by the people who use them, thus creating not just physical infrastructure but actually building social capital for their target communities.

While drawing up a training programme based on the Centre's work, the staff realised their familiar internal processes were not easily understood by outsiders. In addition, much of what they knew about their own work had never been formally evaluated. Bill was roped in to help tease out evidence that pointed to the less obvious long-term impact of the Centre's work.

> **Arts-Based Community Development** can be characterised by arts-based activities that:
> 1) nurture and heal people or communities;
> 2) educate and inform us about ourselves and the world;
> 3) build and improve community capacity or infrastructure;
> 4) inspire or mobilise individuals or groups.

Focusing on a Gathering Place initiative in Azalea Park, San Diego, the ensuing research process targeted three areas: **impact** on the community, on the artists, and on the participating organisations.

Different instruments – interviews, surveys, focus groups with the people involved in the project – were employed for data collection. Participation statistics, demographic information, media coverage and financial data were analysed and a network map of the relationships and resources involved in the project was created. The final research report was more than a hundred pages of charts, graphs, pictures and text, which leads one to ask: So how did the research help?

> **For the community itself:** The Gathering Place story was told in a structured and focused way, which, in turn, strengthened the community's reputation internally and externally, and ultimately increased the community's sense of identity and pride.

> **For the Pomegranate Centre:** Their approach, the Pomegranate process, is now much better known, and regarded as a credible community development strategy. They also incorporated what they learnt into future programmes and their training, which attracted new resources to their work.

> **For the artists:** The research allowed them to turn inwards and identify their own best practices. It also established the artists as credible professionals working in the community, which ended up turning more jobs and more work.

Other beneficiaries to this research were the hundreds of organisations, which, as nodes in the network map, could actually turn to the map as a tangible reference of resources they could mine. And at the end of the day, the funders, too, were able to say there was a quantifiable return on their investments.

In studying a programme like Pomegranate, Bill had wanted to know:

- if the art-making was actually benefitting people, families and communities, and also how that benefit occurred. Eg.
  - How did involvement in the arts help neighbours connect more deeply or feel safer?
  - How did involvement in the arts help community members' awareness and understanding of significant issues and their actual participation in those issues?

It is these "if", "how" and "cause-effect" questions that are particularly important for arts organisations to be curious and thinking about.

Burning Questions

One key exercise the seminar participants were asked to do was to think about this question:

> Reflecting on your work that is most significant to you and the difference you are trying to make, what burning question(s) do you have about the work that (if answered) would help you make that difference?

The exercise drew a wide variety of responses on:

- **sustainability** (eg. How do we better empower arts organisations and community artists to create and sustain the work that they do?)
- **measuring impact** (eg. How to demonstrate the difference that has been made in more imaginative ways?)

- the **value of arts for community** (eg. What's the cost of not having arts in community?)

Many of the questions can be grouped broadly into research or practice related concerns, and some examples are shown in the boxes below.

Research-related Questions	Practice-related Questions
- What's the right methodology to measure the impact of the arts? - How do organisations make use of research information? Do they use it? - How can we convey the impact of transformative work in quantitative indicators? - What are the hindrances preventing arts organisations from conducting more research? - What is the capacity required for good research, in terms of setting aside ample manpower and financial resources?	- How do we understand the needs of vulnerable groups and create meaningful/sustainable programmes? - Is what we're doing working? - How do we better understand the impact of our work? - How does one make the process of art-making more meaningful for the community involved? - How do I make a living out of this? - How do I use stories to build social capital in society? - How do I know when is the right time to let go or pull out? When does the artist's role end? - How do we better empower arts organisations and community artists to create and sustain the work that they do? - What would motivate artists to break out of their studio practices to work in/with communities?

The above questions from our artists and community organisers reflect a keen awareness of some gaps in the practice and field. While no easy answers were provided at the session with Bill, the questions were meant as a starting point to think about one's practice and how "research" could perhaps help to chart the course ahead.

Some tips and pointers…

Bill also shared the below pointers that he picked up over time as he researched a range of community arts programmes:

1. First of all, before you put on your researcher hat, give yourself a break and **get clear about what you want to learn**, and **why you want to learn it**. That may seem simple but sometimes people just go off half-cocked and start researching without a focused idea of what they want to know.

2. **Align your methods with your intention**, so that you're not mixing and matching in a way that is incompatible. Make sure that you understand all the audiences that your research is going to be addressed to. Really important, make sure it is in service to the work. Sometimes we end up with research that is in service to the research, which is kind of going backwards.

3. I also encourage folks, especially those working cross-sector, with this advice: **Don't re-invent the wheel**. Folks in other sectors are constantly doing documentation and research, if they have something going that's useful, don't re-invent the wheel; instead, use the stuff they are already doing.
4. Recognise that research can both support and distort the work, so **do no harm**. Remember, please, that research, and a chart, and a graph is not the truth; it's just a tool, a statistic.
5. And finally, it's really important to recognise that you need to take advantage. There is an **inherent advantage to arts-based work** that the arts can illuminate the story in ways that charts and graphs can never illuminate the story.

Parting Words

Bill was asked to leave some parting advice for our artists as well as potential researchers.

To the artists, Bill advises:

> *Honour your discipline, honour your work. If you are making partnerships with the community, be accountable to your community and, where possible, invite professionals from other sectors into your work, particularly those people who are involved in research, to illuminate and to help you advocate for the work, and to learn about what you're doing well and what you're not doing well.*

And on the role of researchers for arts and communities:

> *Not all researchers would find themselves comfortable in the area of community arts. For those who are interested and curious about this interesting and growing sector of the arts world, it would be important to familiarise yourself with practitioners and to be generous in the way in which you serve the work, rather than just look for opportunities to do research.*