

“Filling out the Forms was a Nightmare”: Project Evaluation and the Reflective Practitioner in Community Theatre in Contemporary Northern Ireland

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ABSTRACT

Since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, large sums have been invested in community theatre projects in Northern Ireland, in the interests of conflict transformation and peace building. While this injection of funds has resulted in an unprecedented level of applied theatre activity, opportunities to maximise learning from this activity are being missed. It is generally assumed that project evaluation is undertaken at least partly to assess the degree of success of projects against important social objectives, with a view to learning what works, what does not, and what might work in the future. However, three ethnographic case studies of organisations delivering applied theatre projects in Northern Ireland indicate that current processes used to evaluate such projects are both flawed and inadequate for this purpose. Practitioners report that the administrative work involved in applying for and justifying funding is onerous, burdensome, and occurs at the expense of artistic activity. This is a very real concern when the time and effort devoted to ‘filling out the forms’ does not ultimately result in useful evaluative information. There are strong disincentives for organisations to report honestly on their experiences of difficulties, or undesirable impacts of projects, and this problem is not transcended by the use of external evaluators. Current evaluation processes provide little opportunity to capture unexpected benefits of projects, and small but significant successes which occur in the context of over-ambitious objectives. Little or no attempt is made to assess long-term impacts of projects on communities. Finally, official evaluation mechanisms fail to capture the reflective practice and dialogic analysis of practitioners, which would richly inform future projects. The authors argue that there is a need for clearer lines of communication, and more opportunities for mutual learning, among stakeholders involved in community development. In particular, greater involvement of the higher education sector in partnership with government and non-government agencies could yield significant benefits in terms of optimizing learning from applied theatre project evaluations.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1998, the Good Friday Agreement promised an end to thirty years of violent conflict in and around Northern Ireland. It was supported by a substantial majority of votes in parallel referenda held in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland. Since the Good Friday Agreement, hundreds of millions of pounds have been invested in peace building and social development programmes by the governments of Ireland, the UK and Europe, supported by international non-government organisations and charitable foundations. The EU Peace 2 programme alone spent almost €707 million on peace building and social development projects in Northern Ireland and the border region of the Republic of Ireland between 2001 and 2005 (European Commission Office in Northern Ireland, 2004, p. 2). One of the key areas of investment has been in the community arts. The Arts Council of Northern Ireland (henceforth ACNI) estimates that it spent over £17.7 million on community arts in Northern Ireland between 2001 and 2005, of which projects involving theatre and drama received more money than any other art form (Matarasso, 2006).

Community-based arts were perceived to be a powerful tool for generating the kinds of new cultural perspectives and social relationships necessary for conflict transformation, as well as a means of introducing new forms of investment and skills transfer into socially disadvantaged areas. According to an ACNI art form policy statement, community arts participation “harnesses the transformative power of original artistic expression to produce a range of social, cultural and environmental outcomes” (ACNI, 2007, p. 8).

The availability of these new forms of funding in the area of applied and social theatre in Northern Ireland has brought with it increasingly complicated and bureaucratic systems of project evaluation. Many individual projects have had to draw on multiple sources of partial funding, for which it is often a requirement that matching funding be drawn from other sources. In this paper, we will show how the demands of project administration and assessment have come to take up most of the time and energy of the staff of applied theatre delivery organisations. Increasingly, this has led to a situation where artistic practitioners have been co-opted into full-time administrative positions, with little opportunity for creative practice. Community arts organisations have come to depend on freelance practitioners to deliver their projects on an *ad hoc* and short term basis. This situation has inhibited the development of consistent approaches to practice and ongoing, in-depth relationships with participant groups.

Evaluation has become a corporate chore, often contracted out to professional consultants, whereby boxes can be ticked and formulaic cases made for the justification of funding (Leeuw, 2009). Practitioners’ and participants’ experiences and backgrounds have been either ignored or reduced to quantitative indicators for the fulfillment of socio-political objectives. There has been little space for the development of ongoing critical and reflective practice. In any case, practitioners have little motivation to assess their work critically, at least within the public sphere. Their continued employment has depended on positive (and positivist) individual project evaluations. Finally, the levels of funding available from local, national and international bodies to all cultural and social development programmes have decreased dramatically since 2007, even prior to the so-called ‘credit crunch’. This situation has raised the stakes within the sector for individual organisations whose

existence is threatened and for communities still struggling with sectarianism and socio-economic disadvantage.

In these conditions, applied theatre project evaluations can approach the level of a public relations or marketing exercise, where each report acts as a form of superficial self-advocacy on behalf of the delivery organisation and the commissioning agency. Evaluation reports are intended to provide evidence that the requirements of the funding criteria have been met on completion of the project. They might also provide opportunities for critical reflection and professional development of methodology and practice. However, when the assistance of a community or the survival of an organisation is at stake, there is great pressure on the integrity of both of these objectives.

In order to combat these pressures, Philip Taylor (2003) has called for evaluation processes that foreground the experiences of the reflective practitioner and the crystallisation of various participant perspectives into a multitext narrative. With such a model, evaluation reports may provide greater depth and detail on the specific context and nature of each individual project and at the same time increase the opportunities for both commissioning agencies and practitioners to learn from their efforts. This paper will explore the differences between this kind of model, and the official evaluation procedures and documents of contemporary social theatre in Northern Ireland. It will do so in relation to ethnographic case studies of three organisations that were delivering applied and social theatre projects in Northern Ireland between 1998 and 2008.

The first section of this paper will involve a critical analysis of the dominant models of evaluation and assessment within the community drama sector of Northern Ireland, placing these in the context of the international debates surrounding evaluation methodologies generally. We will then examine the evaluation procedures followed by the case study organisations, comparing their project evaluation documents with actual practices in the field. This research is drawn primarily from ethnographic observation and semi-structured interviews with practitioners and participants involved with specific projects delivered by the case study organisations. These are supplemented by the participant observations of the first writer of this article, who has been closely involved in the practice of two of the case study organisations, The Playhouse and Greater Shantallow Community Arts (henceforth GSCA), since 2002.

EVALUATION AND POLICY

François Matarasso has been a major influence on the development of community arts evaluation methodologies in Northern Ireland since the publication of *Vital Signs: Mapping Community Arts in Belfast* in 1998. An ACNI strategic review described this study as the primary evidence of the positive social outcomes of community arts participation in the region (Matarasso, 2006, p. 23). In his Belfast-based research, Matarasso employed the same set of methodologies developed for his earlier international study *Use or Ornament?: The Social Impact of Participation in the Arts* (1997), which had a significant impact on the formation of cultural policy in the UK under Tony Blair's New Labour government. As Paola Merli described it:

While earlier publications on the social impact of the arts had attracted relatively little attention, Matarasso's study has played an important role in establishing a near-consensus in Britain among cultural policy-makers. (2002, p. 107)

Merli is one of a number of writers who have been extremely critical of both Matarasso's perceived ideological assumptions and his methodology. The first part of this criticism hinges on the idea that Matarasso's research has been closely associated with the transformation of the participatory arts from a politically radical grass roots 'movement' into a top-down programme of social engineering:

While the original phenomenon was a spontaneous movement, its revival is a device "offered" by the government...in the revival of interest in participatory arts advocated by Matarasso the aim is the restoration of social control using the same tools, although otherwise directed. (Merli, 2002, p. 114)

In this article, we will not address the full ideological implications of this critique¹. However, it is relevant to point out that, while the programme objectives and evaluation categories of community-based theatre in Northern Ireland have been determined at an executive level (using models developed by Matarasso), responsibility for the delivery and evaluation of these programmes has been placed within the community and voluntary sector, despite the fact that this sector has fewer resources than either the private or public sector. Meanwhile, the client communities and individuals of this 'third sector' have little or no say in determining the agenda and evaluation criteria of these programmes. Community and voluntary arts organisations have therefore been placed in a situation of having to justify their activities to government funding bodies, at the same time as attracting the support of community participants who may have different priorities and concerns to these bodies.

Merli also casts doubt upon the internal and external validity of Matarasso's research methodology itself. In particular, Merli describes the use of one-off questionnaires, with predetermined categories and a limited range of potential responses, as superficial and misleading. There are two specific problems with this methodology. One is that evaluation by questionnaire alone offers respondents no opportunity for reflection, critical thought or dialogue regarding their experiences. A second problem is that Matarasso's methodology does not incorporate any longitudinal aspect; there is no attempt to collect evidence on the impact of community arts projects any length of time after their completion.

According to Etherton and Prentki, in their introduction to a special issue of *Research in Drama Education* in 2006, the preference for short term evaluation reports (or proving what was claimed to be done was actually done) over long-term impact assessment dominates the fields of both social development and applied theatre globally:

There is a risk that this process can become one of seeking the lowest common denominator amongst the quantitative data, such as number of participants or incidence of condom usage before and after the event. This 'raw' *quantitative data* can then be spiced up by a few judiciously selected quotations – *the qualitative assessment* – about how a person's understanding of an issue has been altered by the process. This type of methodology is caught up entirely in the moment of the process and any notion of assessing the impact upon an individual, group or community in terms of permanent changes in behaviour and attitude is absent. (Etherton & Prentki, 2006, pp. 144-145)

¹ For a more extensive discussion of the ramifications of top-down community arts policy in Northern Ireland since the Good Friday Agreement, see Jennings, 2009.

It is exactly this kind of approach to monitoring and evaluation that has prevailed amongst the community arts organisations of Northern Ireland over the last ten years.

In the immediate term, community drama providers, artist facilitators and external evaluators have been under pressure to deliver evaluations that justify further funding. As Philip Taylor points out:

Those who commission applied theatre are often intent on receiving reports they can use to ensure sustained funding. They can be less than supportive of reports that are critical of the program or point to weaknesses in it... these evaluation reports can be crucial to the agency's survival and can be used as evidence in applications to seek further financial support. (2003, pp. 104-105)

This pressure constrains the potential for critical reflection and the development of praxis. It can also lead to a failure to record or appreciate what the actual impact, both personal and social, has been on the people involved in a project. Detailed information about individual participants' personal development is only considered useful to 'commissioning agents' insofar as it can provide convincing quantitative data.

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Since 1998, the funding bodies sponsoring community arts programmes in Northern Ireland and the border counties of the Republic have required increasingly detailed evaluation of every project delivered. The basic methodology of these evaluations, however, has incorporated the use of quantitative data generated from Matarasso-style one-off questionnaires. The resulting evaluation reports have either been written by the staff of the organisations delivering the projects or by professional evaluation consultants hired by the delivery organisations to process the data.

The responsibility for ensuring that participants fill out the evaluation questionnaires has usually fallen to the practitioner facilitating the project. In some cases payment has been withheld from practitioners until enough forms have been filled out by participants.

The ACNI review of its 2001-2006 Strategic Plan conceded that the emphasis on *pro forma* monitoring and evaluation of individual projects had had two major negative outcomes. On the one hand, it produced a relationship of frustrated dependency and poor communication between arts organisations and funding bodies. On the other, it failed to provide any useful systematic information on the social, economic and cultural impact of community arts activity in Northern Ireland.

According to the 2006 report, the principal achievement of the previous five years of ACNI evaluation had been the preparation for the possibility of "a different and more robust form of research in Northern Ireland":

The creation of monitoring and evaluation structures and processes by the Arts Council over the period of the last plan has provided the foundation of a framework and the tools to demonstrate the positive economic and social benefits of arts intervention. (ACNI, 2006, p. 23)

EVALUATION ON THE GROUND: THE CASE STUDIES

The fraught relationship between the community drama sector and the funding bodies is indicated by the frequent complaints about application and evaluation procedures made in interviews conducted by the first author in the course of his doctoral research. Full-time staff at Partisan Productions in Belfast, The Playhouse in Derry, and Greater Shantallow Community Arts, all complained of the workloads associated with the evaluation and monitoring of projects supported by the ACNI. Perhaps the best summary of this perspective is given by Karen McFarlane of Partisan productions:

[We have had problems with] the funding, the lack of that and the insecurity of it - relying on year by year funding, but also the time issue, in terms of applying, monitoring, the evaluation reports, financial claims...funders can often send everything back two or three times for clarification on this that and the other. So that's a huge downer, to be honest with you. It's great to get the funding and we are grateful for the support of the work but the actual process of administration and red tape is a pain. (Interview with the first author, 13 February 2008)

Similarly, staff and practitioners at Upstate Theatre, based in the Republic of Ireland but working on cross-border community theatre projects under EU Peace 2 funding, have struggled with the evaluation regime of European peace building. Declan Gorman, Artistic Director at Upstate, described the situation thus:

Funding...has been a huge bother in terms of workload and administration and the bureaucracy that goes with it...I watch my colleagues across the office and yearn for them tragically as they are asked to dig up receipts and invoices from literally five years ago...It beggars belief that young artists accede to doing this. But they do it. (Interview with the first author, 26 November 2007)

Both Partisan and Upstate had only two full-time staff until 2008. Under the EU Peace 1 programme, which lasted from 1997 to 2002, these staffing levels were sufficient to meet the requirements of project administration. But in 2003, the Peace 2 programme introduced more complex and demanding application and evaluation processes. At the same time, both Partisan and Upstate were expanding their client base, as community groups from throughout Northern Ireland and the border counties of the Republic sought their services. While both the EU Peace 2 programme and the ACNI made increased project funding available during this period, it was more difficult to obtain funding for increased numbers of full time staff. The experienced full time practitioners from these organisations were required to become administrative staff, hiring in the services of freelance practitioners to deliver their projects. With few exceptions, these freelance practitioners had less knowledge of the methodologies of these organisations and the requirements of their client community groups than the full-time staff and less time to develop this knowledge.

Meanwhile, the evaluation of projects delivered by community arts organisations had an increasingly significant bearing on their potential to receive further funding from cultural policy bodies. Edel Murphy, Community Arts Development Officer at the ACNI, reflected:

Currently Lottery Project funding through the Arts Council of Northern Ireland is administered on an annual basis through a competitive application and assessment process. Due to the increased pressure on Lottery funds for the arts this means that

the onus is on the applicant organisation to demonstrate on paper a close fit to the set criteria. I get applicant groups submitting proposals quite often, however as groups that are new to the processes and having no legacy of successful grants with the Arts Council, they are at a disadvantage and often it is very difficult for them to compete with those applicants who know the system. (Interview with the first author, 4 June 2008)

In this kind of intensely competitive environment, where new applicants have little or no chance of receiving funding, and previously-successful applicants are having to manage shorter funding cycles and the regular threat of discontinuation, organisations are under a great deal of pressure to return evaluations that present their work as successful in relation to the public agenda. In this regard, it is problematic that community drama organisations write their own evaluation reports. Of course, artists and arts organisations must be accountable for the public funding they receive, and demonstrate that they have spent these funds honestly and effectively. However, if the primary focus of these artists and arts organisations becomes the attempt to prove that they have met government criteria, then their attention to the specific details of their artistic practice and the needs of their participant groups will suffer as a result.

One example of a self-generated report to the Arts Council of Northern Ireland was the National Lottery Fund Access End of Year/Project Report (2008), submitted by Greater Shantallow Community Arts (GSCA) in October 2008 as an evaluation of their Arts in the Community project. The Greater Shantallow area is an area of serious social and economic deprivation:

The population of the Greater Shantallow Area is around 43,000 (40% of the population of Derry)... It has a very high proportion of young people with 43% of the population under the age of 17...with figures for long-term unemployed put at 55.59%. The combined effects of long term unemployment, poverty and the impact of 30 years of political conflict have all had a detrimental effect on the social, economic and physical fabric of the area. (Barr, 2006, p. 2)

The Arts in the Community programme involved a huge range of activities throughout the year, including a large-scale street carnival and short courses in playing the tin whistle, music technology and recording, wood sculpting, and a brief history of European visual art. One component of the Arts in the Community programme was a community theatre production of *The Playboy of the Western World*, for which the first author was the director and lead facilitator. With so many activities to cover in the end-of-year report, one might expect that the section of the evaluation concerning the Playboy production would be brief. Here it is:

This programme was facilitated by both Matt Jennings and Laverne O'Donnell offered participants [sic] the unique opportunity to be involved in every aspect concerned in creating a drama production from acting, stage and set design etc., concluding in the excellent production of J.M.Synge's, *Playboy of the Western World*, which was showcased for two nights at St Brigid's High School, proving to be an immense success. (GSCA, 2008, p. 3)

Other than similarly succinct summaries of the other activities delivered under the Arts in the Community programme, the evaluation report responds to questions "1.2 Did you deliver the project as envisaged in the application form?" and "1.3 Does your organisation feel that it fully met the aims and objectives of the project, including the projected budget, as described in the application?" with a simple highlighting of the word "Yes" (GSCA, 2008, p. 3). No details are requested in the report form unless the answers to these questions are "No".

The rest of the report consists of tables recording the numbers of participants involved in the activities, the audience numbers for the performances, and the amount of money spent. According to these tables, *The Playboy of the Western World* involved 20 participants, seven of whom were under 25 years of age, and attracted an audience of 120, 50 of whom were under 25 years of age (GSCA, 2008, p.5).

The final question on the report from is "Did you encounter any difficulties/ exceptional circumstances, in terms of the project, of which you wish to make the Arts Council's National Lottery Fund aware? eg. Financial, administrative, artistic, personnel, marketing, timetable". Only a "Yes or No" answer is required. The GSCA Arts in the Community report replies "No" (GSCA, 2008, p. 11).

As the director of the show, the first author can attest that our small element of the programme encountered many difficulties. The production had an overall total budget of £1500, with which the GSCA production team was required to find or make 'authentic' late 19th century period sets, props and costumes. There was no confirmed venue until ten days before the show was due to open. Rehearsals took place in a tiny run-down boxing club that the local children liked to use for rock-throwing practice. Seven cast members withdrew from the production as they became overwhelmed by the prospect of performing a difficult classical text in front of an audience drawn from an estate with a long-term unemployment rate of 56%. The fact that the project and the production happened at all - let alone that it attracted good crowds and generated a hugely positive response - was a minor miracle.

This GSCA/ACNI evaluation document could not be said to "highlight the recursive, reflective thinking of those who participate in applied theatre" as recommended by Taylor (2003). No other official evaluation processes took place in relation to this project.

The assertion that the GSCA production of *The Playboy of the Western World* was an "immense success" does not specify the terms of such success. In interviews conducted as part of this research, participants and audience members asserted that a surprisingly high level of performance skill and entertainment value was achieved by the production:

There was this crowd that were coming in, mothers and stuff like that, people from the community, and they were kind of walking around going 'oh, we'll just have a cup of tea' or 'my daughter's in it', rather than 'this will be good craic, won't it'. But then when they were coming out at the end of it, they were all like 'that was actually fucking good!'

If I was to compare it to anything that I'd been involved in on a semi-professional or professional level or any other productions that have I been involved in, I would say that it compares very highly. I have been involved, on a number of levels, with various professional productions that I would say were boring in comparison. (Group interview with the first author, 14th November 2008)

This success may be partly ascribed to the fact that a great deal of time and energy during rehearsals was given to developing the participants' understanding of the language and the action of the play. The first author, as the director of the production, deployed a range of techniques, including elements of Stanislavsky's method of physical action and some of Augusto Boal's exercises on sub-text, in order to make the objectives and relationships of the characters within the play as clear and strong as possible. In terms of the dialogue between technique and context,

the actors were encouraged to draw on and discuss their own experiences and perceptions in relation to their character's actions and circumstances.

While these approaches might be standard operating procedure to professional theatre practitioners, they were unfamiliar to the community cast, not just to the beginners, but also to the participants with experience of amateur and semi-professional theatre. In fact, the latter were the most resistant to these techniques, because they were used to a process of simply learning their lines and 'blocking' their movements.

Every member of the cast, including four who had never performed in a full-length play before, went on to participate in further theatrical productions in Derry and Donegal, some professionally. Four of the *Playboy* cast went on to form the core of a community theatre company, 'Here We Go' Productions, supported by GSCA. In terms of the skill development and cultural engagement of these individuals, the project clearly had some impact.

At one point in the rehearsal process, a group of about 20 children who had been throwing rocks at the rehearsal venue were invited in to watch a run-through of the show. They appeared to be entertained and captivated by the experience, laughing when it was funny, gasping when it was scary, sitting quietly throughout and asking many interested questions afterwards. It was a gratifying moment for the cast, who were reassured about the accessibility of the text and the effectiveness of their performances. In a sense, this event 'embedded' the project in the community. No further rocks were thrown at the building.

But were these the kinds of "social, cultural and environmental outcomes" envisaged by the project and the ACNI? In terms of the social, cultural and economic needs of the Greater Shantallow area, could it be said that the increased skill levels and enthusiasm of the participants improved general employment levels? Did the fact that audiences were impressed and entertained improve their standards of living or their perception of their own potential? What aspects of the project increased its efficacy in relation to these objectives?

It would be extremely difficult to answer these questions in any context. This is an area of ongoing debate and development within applied arts research. Perhaps an ACNI end-of-year report would not be the appropriate context for their discussion. However, the inclusion of some of the above information in the report could have created the possibility of stimulating and informing such discussions. This might have increased its usefulness both to the GSCA, in the documentation and development of its praxis, and to the ACNI, in terms of improving its relationships with arts organisations and developing a deeper strategic assessment of the impact of community arts activity.

This is not to say that either the GSCA or the ACNI were at fault in the generation of an evaluation report that primarily 'counted the heads' of participants and audiences. At public policy level, quantitative, statistical data are the priority. Neither the GSCA nor the ACNI had the resources to deliver any further qualitative detail to their evaluations. During the course of the project, GSCA lost seven of its nine full-time staff due to funding cuts from the Department of Social Development. More detailed reports became difficult to generate. Not long after that, Edel Murphy, who had maintained a close personal observation of the activities of GSCA despite being the sole Community Arts development officer within the ACNI, was moved to

responsibility for a different area of arts funding within ACNI. Nonetheless, at the time of writing, the ACNI continues to support the work of GSCA, including the 'Here We Go' community theatre company.

The frustrating aspect is that, since time and resources are (quite properly) being devoted to evaluation in the interests of public accountability, it is desirable to ensure that evaluation processes deliver as much value as possible to a range of stakeholders (including the funding body, policy makers, artists, arts organisations, and the public), for the future as well as the present. Mark has criticized the lack of attention given to the *accumulation* of knowledge over projects:

How little cumulative knowledge we are developing in the field about the programs we evaluate – what effects they do and don't have, for whom they work, how they bring about change, and so forth. (Mark, 2001, p. 460)

The reduction of evaluation to a box-ticking process as described by Leeuw (2009), and the promotion of a "compliance culture in evaluation" (Ryan 2003), hinder the development of a body of knowledge and wisdom about the impacts of community arts that could profoundly inform future policy and practice.

The European Union Peace 2 programme operated a different regime of funding and evaluation to the ACNI and, as part of the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), had substantially more resources to draw on. Peace 2 funded both the Arts Yard project at The Playhouse in Derry/Londonderry and the Upstate Theatre Crossover project. Peace 2 required that the evaluation reports on these projects were written by external agencies – often considered a way to ensure objectivity. However there are still problems when external evaluators have been hired by client community arts organisations.

The Arts Yard project was a two-year cross-border, cross-community collaboration between The Playhouse Theatre in Derry, Northern Ireland, and the Abbey Arts Centre, Ballyshannon, Co. Donegal, in the Republic of Ireland. It ran from September 2005 to June 2007. The first author was involved in Arts Yard Programme 3, the after-school project conducted in the second year of the project, as a drama facilitator. This drama module involved 21 young people, aged 12-18, drawn from both the Protestant and Catholic communities of Derry/Londonderry, working in collaboration with a group of 18 young people of similar age from Ballyshannon.

Project impact was measured primarily in terms of participant numbers (categorised according to stated religious background). For both groups, there were higher proportions of Catholic participants, but this reflects the demographics of the catchment areas. In both towns, Catholics represent 75-90% of the population. The project managed to recruit participant numbers representative of these proportions, about 70% Catholic for the two groups overall. This was despite the endemic difficulty of recruiting Protestant participants for community drama projects throughout Northern Ireland. The evaluation report generated quantitative 'scores' drawn from participants' written responses to statements such as "other people sometimes have good ideas", "I can think for myself" and "towns are made up of people from different backgrounds" (Peter Quinn Consultancy Services, 2008, p. 42).

Upstate Theatre Local had been developing community theatre projects in County Louth and other parts of the Republic of Ireland since 1997. In 2002 Upstate began to work with groups in Northern Ireland, specifically in the rural counties of Tyrone

and Fermanagh. This cross-border and cross-community project, known as Crossover, also involved working with groups in the border counties of Monaghan and Louth in the Republic. The project was administered by Border Action, an intermediary body managing and evaluating SEUPB Peace funds. It was wound up at the end of 2007, as the Peace 2 round of funding came to an end.

As with the Arts Yard project, the Crossover project evaluation depended on quantitative interpretations of questionnaire data as per the model developed by Matarasso. Participants were asked to rate how strongly they agreed or disagreed, on scale of 1 to 10, with statements such as "I have made new friends" and "I have met and worked with people I would not otherwise have come across" (McCormack, 2008, p. 11). There were, however, significant differences in the relationships between the case study organisations and the external agencies conducting these evaluations.

An external consultancy firm prepared the Arts Yard evaluation on behalf of The Playhouse weeks after the termination of the programme, and had no direct contact with the majority of the participants or facilitators involved with the project. From the authors' point of view, there are two major problems with the resulting report which highlight the dangers of such 'tacked-on' evaluation processes. Firstly, the report fails to distinguish between the drama components of Programme 1 and Programme 3, although the two programmes ran a year apart (2006 and 2007 respectively), were delivered by different facilitator teams, and involved different participant groups. Programme 1 was generally considered by the project team to have been unsuccessful, while Programme 3 was considered to have made significant achievements (see below). The evaluation report includes many errors of fact related to the conflation of these two disparate programmes.

Secondly, as noted above, commentators such as Taylor and Etherton and Prentki emphasise that monitoring and evaluation processes for applied theatre projects should build in capacity for critical reflection and dialogical praxis. We have pointed out that such reflection is useful not only to arts practitioners who are continually developing their own practice, but to funding bodies which are ideally placed to synthesise knowledge about effective practice over projects and over time. However, it is almost impossible to distil useful understandings from a project if the evaluation consists of no more than a brief review conducted after its conclusion. The first author can attest that the practitioners involved in the Arts Yard project – including the project coordinators from the Abbey Centre and The Playhouse, the facilitator of the Ballyshannon group, and the assistant facilitators – engaged in extensive reflective discussions throughout the project, with each other and with the participants, on the themes and activities to be explored within the drama module of Arts Yard Programme. However, none of this rich data was captured through the evaluation to inform other practitioners and future projects.

The Arts Yard project received funding under Peace 2 "Programme Measure 5.4: Promoting Joint Approaches to Social, Education, Training and Human Resource Development". Under the terms of this 'measure', Arts Yard was required to:

Address the legacy of the conflict, address specific problems generated by the conflict in order to assist return to a normal, peaceful and stable society. (Peter Quinn Consultancy Services, 2008, p. 3)

During the course of the drama module of Arts Yard Programme 3, the decision was made, in consultation with the young people involved, to address these objectives through an exploration of the individual heritages of each of the participants, rather than any generic notion of ‘community identity’. This was done through the gathering and presentation of anecdotes drawn from members of their families over 50 years of age, recounting their experiences of life when they were the same age as the participants. Without pressing for stories of conflict, a diverse range of experiences of life as a teenager in Northern Ireland and Donegal in the 1960s and 1970s was uncovered, some of which (although very few) were directly related to the conflict.

This non-directive approach to theme development enabled positive and friendly relations between participants, greater candour in the intergenerational communications within their families, and a greater sense of ownership within the group as a whole. It also led to a performance that presented a perspective on the period of ‘the Troubles’ broader than the conventional ‘bombs and bullets’ show, presenting a variety of examples of ‘normal, peaceful, stable life’ that occurred even at the height of the conflict. A collaborative and improvisational devising process meant that all members of the group became familiar with each other’s stories and explored multiple creative interpretations of these stories.

It could be argued (and was, informally, between members of the facilitation team) that this was the most effective way of addressing the legacy of conflict in the context of the participant group. The difficulty of engaging participants in Northern Ireland, especially young people, with an explicit ‘peace and reconciliation’ agenda has been widely acknowledged (Poulter, 1997; Maguire, 2006; Jennings, 2009), and non-prescriptive, collaborative approaches have generally proved to achieve greater efficacy.

However, the official evaluation process provided no avenue to capture and transmit these discoveries beyond the personal reflections of the people involved, or to reflect the growth of the organisations and practitioners which occurred as a result of conducting the project. Again, we recognise that funding bodies must assess whether organisations have delivered what was originally proposed and funded with public money. However, it is arguably also part of accountability to present information on unexpected outcomes, both positive and negative (Etherton & Prentki, 2006). The examples above show that a community may benefit from a project in ways more subtle and nuanced than was foreseen at the time of setting the original objectives. The indirect approach to conflict transformation emerged through the participatory process, and was perhaps counterintuitive in the context of the funding guidelines, but it proved highly effective – at least, in the project team’s assessment. Unless such information is meaningfully transmitted via the evaluation process, funding bodies and policy makers miss the opportunity to gain a more sophisticated understanding of what community arts projects can (and, perhaps, cannot) hope to achieve.

While the Upstate Theatre Local Crossover project was also evaluated by an external agency, Border Action, the evaluation was conducted very differently. Border Action was involved in the evaluation of the Crossover project from its commencement in 2003. Border Action delivered an evaluation based on continuous processes of individual and group interviewing involving all of the participants and facilitators as well as regular written questionnaires. This approach may appear more rigorous than those used for the GSCA and Arts Yard projects, but it had its own attendant

problems. As Irene White, the facilitator of the Crossover group in Monaghan described it:

The tutor had to fill out lots of evaluation forms. Almost every week. It was a nightmare. (Interview with the first author, 6 February 2009)

Also, White had doubts as to the reliability of the feedback offered by the participants in their interviews and questionnaires:

There was an independent evaluator or assessor or whatever. She would have come up on occasion and spoken to the group and had meetings and they would express their opinions at those. She would also have had surveys for them to complete and they would have done that. But they would be conscious of saying the right things. They wouldn't be critically reflective or whatever. They just wouldn't. They would try and anticipate what she would like to hear and they would just try and say that. So any feedback that you would receive wouldn't necessarily be an accurate picture anyway. (Interview with the first author, 6 February 2009)

It is a risk in any qualitative research or evaluation process that interviewees might attempt to give 'the right answer'. For the Upstate Theatre Crossover Project, evaluators sought and participants provided information supporting the EU peace building agenda and this information was subsequently turned into statistical data generalised across the entire project as a whole. This is the primary function of evaluation reports to funding bodies and it could be argued that it is the most appropriate function for such reports.

However, this statistical generalisation elided a number of important differences between the various Crossover participant groups. For instance, former Crossover participants from the town of Clones identified themselves and the town as predominantly Catholic Nationalist and expressed frustration at the ongoing pressure to engage with neighbouring Protestant communities who showed no interest in getting involved (group interview with the first author 5 June 2008). On the other hand, the Enniskillen Crossover group included a mixture of Catholics, Protestants and one Hindu, but regarded ethno-religious categories as less significant in their lives than women's rights and disability issues (group interview with the first author 9 June 2008). Meanwhile, the Monaghan Crossover group, although predominantly Catholic and exclusively drawn from the Republic of Ireland, included a wide range of participants in terms of age, background and capacity. From White's perspective as the facilitator of the project, the primary achievement for some of the Crossover group was to overcome serious personal obstacles and manage to get out of the house, let alone perform in public:

The success of the production from my point of view anyway would be measured by the fact that they completed it and partook in it and the show actually went on, because there were lots of hairy moments where it looked like that may not happen...You have to look at the impact of it on the members of the group in terms of what it does for them as individuals, in terms of improving their confidence and self-esteem and generally feeling better about themselves. Because there are a couple of individuals who would suffer from mental health problems and depression, in some instances quite serious, and I would have had great concerns for those people throughout the process...So for some of those individuals, it was a huge, huge, huge, huge personal success. You couldn't really emphasise that enough really. (Interview with the first author, 6 February 2009)

The Crossover project, however, being funded under the Peace 2 programme, was evaluated in relation to its impact on cross-community and cross-border attitudes

and cultural exchange. The Border Action report was more concerned with the difficulty in recruiting Protestant participants and attracting Protestant audiences than with the benefits of the programme to the mental health of the mainly Catholic participants. Although mention is made of the disparate profiles and perspectives of each of the groups involved in the Crossover project, the fact that participants had different priorities to the commissioning body was addressed as a difficulty, rather than an opportunity. Although all of these groups had been affected by the conflict, directly or indirectly, their coping strategies varied greatly and generally depended on a desire to move on from the issue.

ISSUES IN SUMMARY

Community drama practitioners in Northern Ireland have been required to deliver conflict transformation, social and personal development, educational qualifications and original performance products within time frames, working environments and resource levels that would be prohibitive in relation to any single one of these objectives. It is generally assumed that project evaluation is undertaken at least partly in order to assess the degree of success of projects against important social objectives, with a view to learning what works, what does not, and what might work in the future. The above case studies suggest, however, that current processes used to evaluate community drama projects in Northern Ireland are both flawed and inadequate for such a purpose. In the absence of detailed, honest and critical analysis of the impacts of these programmes, the opportunity to learn the lessons of this unprecedented period of applied drama activity could be lost.

It is a common complaint in many countries and many art forms that the administrative work involved in applying for and justifying funding is onerous, burdensome, and occurs at the expense of artistic activity. However, it is a very real concern when the time and effort devoted to 'filling out the forms' does not ultimately result in useful evaluative information.

Since evaluations are seen as providing a foundation for further funding, there is a strong disincentive for practitioners and organisations to report honestly on their experiences of any difficulties implementing the project (since this might reflect negatively on their professionalism and competence), and their observations of impacts which are less than or different from the stated objectives of the project (since these might suggest that the project was 'unsuccessful' or that the organisation failed to focus sufficiently on the project objectives). This disincentive applies whether the organisation conducts its own evaluation, or whether an external evaluator is employed by the organisation to conduct the evaluation. Even in the case where an external evaluator was truly external (e.g., employed by the funding agency), the dependence of future funding on 'successful' evaluations is likely to work against the collection of accurate information, as one interviewee suggested above, facilitators and participants loyal to a project are likely to 'say what the evaluator wants to hear'.

Current evaluation processes provide little opportunity to capture unexpected benefits of projects. The emphasis on a project's ability to meet pre-defined objectives may obscure successes which have occurred in areas of equal social value - for example, gains in the individual mental health and well-being of participants in a project ostensibly addressing conflict transformation. Similarly, where project objectives are highly ambitious, the evaluation may fail to capture small but significant successes. This point was demonstrated in the Crossover project, where

for some participants it was a major life milestone to participate in an artistic activity at all. As Etherton and Prentki point out,

A creative devising process that deals in human relationships is always prone to communicate more or something different than is intended. Monitoring and evaluation tends to be constructed to measure what is intended by the initiative or project activity. Impact assessment, on the other hand, must take account of any result which provokes change, regardless of the stated aims of the project or program. (2006, p. 147)

Baños Smith (2006) has also highlighted the importance of capturing any negative impacts of projects, and any unintended effects, since these are essential to an understanding of the bigger picture and to effective planning for future activities. Current evaluation processes provide little opportunity for the reporting of unexpected effects, and the dependence of future funding on 'positive' project evaluations discourages the acknowledgement of any negative impacts.

The emphasis on assessment of process (e.g., number of participants) and short-term impact (e.g., quantified responses to one-off questionnaires) is clearly inadequate for the evaluation of the long-term effects of a project on a community. The argument might be made that funding agencies only fund projects they believe, on the basis of previous research and the arguments made by the applicants, will have desirable consequences for a community. Following this logic, the funding agency need only concern itself with the integrity of the programme's implementation (in Etherton and Prentki's terminology, "monitoring and evaluation", 2006), and not with assessing the long-term impacts (which might better be conceptualised as 'research').

There are a number of counter-arguments to this notion. One is the well-recognised dearth of compelling evidence for the effectiveness of arts-based programmes for social development (e.g., Cultural Ministers Statistics Working Group 2004). Policy should drive funding, and research should drive policy. While an extensive body of theory attests to the 'transformative' power of applied theatre, and anecdotal reports of perceived benefits of participation in such activities are legion, many commentators (including Etherton and Prentki) lament the scarcity of credible documentation of social benefits which are sustained over time. It seems an absurdity to fund programs which may or may not be effective, while neglecting the obvious opportunity to properly evaluate their effectiveness. Another argument for funding bodies insisting on more comprehensive evaluation, including longitudinal impact assessment, has to do with the efficient use of resources. Since the funding body requires evaluation to be conducted, should not the results of the evaluation be as valuable and useful as possible in terms of planning future policy and guiding future decisions about funding?

The many challenges of conducting long-term impact assessment, including the difficulty of attributing change over time to any one project or programme of intervention, have been well-documented in the evaluation literature (e.g., Earl, Carden & Smutylo, 2001). Nevertheless, a more systematically longitudinal approach to the evaluation of policy directions should be well within the scope of agencies such as the Special European Union Programmes Body, and should surely form part of its mission.

Finally, the development of community theatre as a tool for conflict transformation and peace building will only occur through the reflective practice and dialogic

analysis of practitioners, informed by a deep understanding of the experiences of participants. Although close observation has shown that rich and valuable exchanges have occurred between administrative staff, facilitators and participants in all of the projects mentioned in this article, current evaluation processes fail to capture and transmit the learning from these reflections.

To date, long-term impact assessment and critical analysis of praxis in the field of community arts in Northern Ireland have only been conducted by individual researchers within the higher education sector (e.g., Moriarty, 2004). The insights provided by these isolated studies indicate that significant changes have been achieved. Unfortunately, neither the weaknesses nor the achievements of the sector are currently being accurately reflected through official evaluations of community drama projects.

A WAY FORWARD?

Baños Smith (2006) has argued for the need for clearer lines of communication, and more opportunities for mutual learning among multiple stakeholders, in community development work. In the context of the discussion above, such stakeholders may include public bodies, arts organisations, practitioners and academic researchers. Referring to stakeholder engagement in impact assessment models being developed by Save the Children, Baños Smith observes:

Creating safe spaces for such learning to happen is often talked about but not often enough acted upon, as it is usually seen as a luxury that can be ill-afforded due to the heavy burden of work. The onus is on senior development managers to demonstrate in their own work that reflection and learning processes are not costs but an investment; they are what allow us to become more effective and efficient in our work, to have a greater impact on the lives of children. They must also back up this rhetoric with the structures, resources and support needed to put it into practice. (Baños Smith, 2006, p. 172)

It may be that closer relationships, particularly between funding bodies and researchers in the higher education sector, could result in what the ACNI envisions as “a different and more robust form of research in Northern Ireland” (2006, p. 23). Maximising the learning from routine project evaluation, through greater attention to dialogic and reflexive processes, a stronger emphasis on long-term impact assessment, and systematic meta-evaluation of the outcomes of related projects over time, would potentially benefit all stakeholders including policy-makers, funding bodies, tertiary institutions, community arts organisations, project facilitators and participants, and the community at large.

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