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Recommended Citation

Belisle, Lycette C., "Exploring a Qualitative Approach to Arts Advocacy and Evaluation" (2020).

Undergraduate Theses. 55.

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Exploring a Qualitative Approach to Arts Advocacy and Evaluation

Lycette Belisle

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ABSTRACT

The quantitative impact of the arts has become an increasingly important factor in determining the overall value of a project, and is often used to determine acceptance of submissions, public recognition and funding disbursement. This project evaluates current understandings of how the arts function within society, popular methods for determining the value of the arts and explores how qualitative reasoning can be utilized to communicate the value of supporting artistic endeavors. While placing a numerical value on the arts based on data collection can be important, this project will aim to evaluate the implications of relying so heavily on facts and figures to determine the value of things that are ultimately driven by human experiences that defy measure.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to explore how the arts are currently evaluated, reveal what gets lost when we assess the arts based on a limited lens and convey the importance of recognizing and accurately portraying the impact and value of the arts. Broek (2013) evaluates how time relates to the arts audience in three distinct ways, and examines how these three factors function together to reveal cohorts of individuals that can predict trends in arts participation. This study finds that there is an age, period and cohort effect that can have a significant influence on the development of individuals and choices they end up making; adding or removing one aspect of an individual's overall circumstances or experiences can have a dramatic impact on resulting actions (Broek, 2013).

One significant discovery includes an unexplained decrease in arts participation. Broek (2013) states that the results of the study leave us with “the major challenge of explaining why, independent of age and cohort, US arts participation is on the decline (cf. Stern, 2011) despite a rise in education attainment (which propels arts participation)” (p.53). While Broek did not explore this realization in depth, this results in questions about why such a decline has occurred and what the influencing factors are. Donovan and Gulbrandsen (2018) share that the results of a project meant to “explore how different stakeholders make implicit and explicit statements and judgements about the value of [arts and humanities research]” made it clear that “impact was related to the concept of value, and that traditional measurements of impact – emphasizing cost-benefit analyses and economic effects of research – seemed poorly suited to arts and humanities, which were indeed left out of most of the impact literature” (p. 285). There are numerous obstacles faced when evaluating the arts and humanities, and there are significant limitations when the value of the arts and humanities are measured in certain ways. The analysis of how

value is assigned to the arts provides an interesting lens that can be utilized to explore various topics, including how arts evaluation may impact the decline in arts participation.

Broek (2013) argues that “despite the well-established fact that people are more culturally active the higher educated they are, a major rise in the level of education over decades had nonetheless not resulted in a similar rise in cultural participation” (p. 53). A decline in arts participation such as this one is just one reason that it is essential for arts advocates to explore how the arts are evaluated, how significance is conveyed to the public, in what ways individuals engage with the arts and why people believe the arts are important. It is essential to expand how the arts are evaluated, and Donovan and Gulbrandsen stress the necessity for an approach that “highlights the importance of ‘networks, interaction, intersubjectivity, configurations, texture and flows’ in how we visualize, curate and narrate, research impact, and cultural value, providing an alternative to overly simplistic and conceptually narrow quantitative measures” (p. 286). Traditional measurements and understandings of value are inadequate, and an alternative approach is needed in order to capture a more accurate and encompassing view of the impact of the arts and humanities while arguing for the expansion of what is defined as valuable research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An Economic Approach to Arts Evaluation

The ways in which society assigns value to research often favor particular fields and practices. These methods of evaluation do not adequately assess the impact and value of the arts, resulting in a diminished view of the significance of the arts. Belfiore (2015) addresses the issues surrounding the evaluation of the arts in relation to policymaking in the context of British cultural policy. “The ‘impact agenda’ discourse raises interesting and important questions, such

as what should be the point, the use, the aim and indeed the value of the research produced within the academy” (Belfiore, 2015, p. 100). Instead of applying a limited number of evaluation methods to a broad range of topics, researchers should be able to be intentional about the methods they utilize in order to offer accurate results. Societal standards and expectations, however, seemingly limit what methods are perceived as valid and significant.

Economic impact is often one of the most prominent approaches utilized in order to justify the support of the arts. An article in the *New Hampshire Business Review* reports on the impacts of a study that evaluates the economic impact of the nonprofit arts and culture sector from a data-driven standpoint. Callahan shares a statement from Van McLeod, commissioner of the New Hampshire Department of Cultural Resources, in which he proclaims the figures from the study “affirm the cultural community’s importance to the state’s tourism industry” (p. 11). This study, said to be the first-of-its-kind, presents data collected on revenue produced, origins of the revenue, and impact on the state and its citizens that prove promising for the arts and culture sector in New Hampshire (Callahan, 2012). Callahan also shares that McLeod expressed a twofold importance to the survey stating “...for one it’s important for the communities to understand the impact that arts and culture nonprofit organizations have; but it also gives the organizations ‘an understanding of who they are in their community’” (p.11). This study was successful in conveying the importance of the arts within a community utilizing economic evaluation. It is essential, however, to maintain an understanding that while this is one way to convey impact, it is by no means the only way to effectively advocate for the arts. Madden (2001) explores what economic impact studies look like in relation to arts and culture, expands on why these evaluations are insufficient and argues that they are ultimately counterproductive to advocacy efforts. Madden (2001) states, the use of ‘economic’ impact studies in advocacy is a

form of misinterpreted authority” (p.161) as he argues that these studies often have little relevance when it comes to decisions concerning the allocation of government funding.

Belfiore (2105) recognizes the tendency to lean towards economic evaluations and addresses how utilizing these methods as a means to determine public value is problematic. She states, “this broader discussion should encompass these activities’ economic dimension but critically, not be limited to it” (p.105). It is becoming imperative to find new ways to determine value in a more comprehensive way. When evaluating existing studies, a theme emerges that the use of economic impact to evaluate and advocate for the arts is unwise. Existing economic evaluations of the arts do not adequately reflect or fit into economic theory parameters, and there are better ways to advocate for arts and culture – including economically – that are not being met with current evaluation methods. Madden (2001) shares the view that “economic impacts invite governments to intervene in art and culture for financial gain” (p. 172) and expresses that the results can be disastrous when it comes to arts and culture objectives. Belfiore (2015) argues that “we have seen that socio-economic impact has so far failed to successfully ‘make the case’ for arts funding and to provide a credible solution to the justification issue” (p. 103). There is value in an economic evaluation of the impact of the arts, but studies reveal that solely relying on economic approaches is not assisting in advocacy efforts as much as individuals often believe.

Adequate Assessments and Equal Value

While dominant approaches for assessing impact can convey some value and are worth utilizing, it has become apparent that they cannot adequately convey the value of the arts. As stated previously, it is essential to explore different ways in which the value of the arts can be assessed. The tendency to continue utilizing largely economic approaches in order to evaluate the

arts, however, also raises important questions about how the arts are compared to other fields that must be explored. Olmos-Peñuela, Benneworth and Castro-Martínez (2015) assess the value of the humanities in relation to the sciences from a societal standpoint. They address the issue that the humanities are often seen as less worthy as they attempt to explore if that is actually true and offer an explanation as to why that may be by attempting to understand two different views – less useful compared to useful in a different way – as a means to determine how one could begin to evaluate these differences (Olmos-Peñuela et al., 2015). O’Brien (2015) addresses the question of understanding impact in relation to government programs, how that impact is measured and the problems that can arise by focusing on a British context in order to evaluate not only how things are valued, but why they are valued in those ways. The arts and humanities face unique issues when it comes to measurements of value, and this is extremely important to understand when assessing the impact of the arts.

Olmos-Peñuela et al. (2015) share that the “extremely reductionist set of economic growth-related benefits systematically excluded arts and humanities research’s outcomes” (p. 64). They also suggest that “reinterpreting existing research” in the framework that they present “suggests the answer is more nuanced than is reflected in policy disclosure” (Olmos-Peñuela et al., 2015). Evaluating what characterizes choices in societal value is essential in understanding why the arts may be on the decline and seen as less valuable than other fields. The humanities must be recognized as having an equally important societal value in relation to the sciences, and that the value they both possess merely presents itself in different ways. O’Brien (2015) states, “there is currently a tension between the way public policy understands value and the way value is understood and created by the arts and humanities” (p. 79). This is especially important to understand when considering the role that the arts and humanities play within society. O’Brien

(2015) also asserts that “the unquantifiable nature of culture is sometimes used by particular cultural policy interest groups to argue that the forms of decision making associated with modern government are not applicable to cultural questions” (p.86). This is problematic because the arts are placed outside of the realm of value that society as a whole understands, and consequently results in the notion that the arts are somehow less valuable than things that are easier to quantify. These studies reveal that a more encompassing evaluation of the arts and the value they possess is integral to a broader understanding of cultural practices, and further emphasizes the necessity to expand evaluation methods.

An Alternative Approach

It is clear that there are obstacles that exist when attempting to convey the value of the arts and of arts and humanities research to society. Other disciplines have had much more success in conveying their value, and individuals are failing to see the same value that the arts and humanities are able to document and portray. Benneworth (2015) affirms these arguments and ultimately calls for a more intentional attempt to recognize the same value arts and humanities research arguments have in comparison to other disciplines. Benneworth (2015) states, “...a more positive set of conversations are seeking to proactively reframe ideas of impacts, societal benefit and cultural value in terms of humanities’ own beliefs and practices” (p. 46). Brown and Novak-Leonard (2013) evaluate what has been done, what is being done, what is missing and what can be done in an effort to effectively communicate the value of the arts without losing what is at the core. “The challenge lies in aggregating the individual level impacts in some fashion so as to help frame and inform a policy-level understanding of the public value

of the arts” (p.231). Based on this understanding and assessment, it is safe to say that a qualitative approach to arts evaluation is an essential next step in justifying the value of the arts.

The value of the arts to people and communities and how that value is articulated is a huge issue. This issue is largely due to the application of evaluation methods that are not able to accurately assess the arts and humanities. Brown and Novak-Leonard (2013) outline different aspects that are important to the evaluation of the arts and point out that the means by which we can measure that value are ultimately lacking. The impact of the arts has often been evaluated in very limited ways, and that has contributed to the growing need for those involved in the arts to provide evidence of value and impact. Benneworth offers an explanation as to how arts and humanities research can be conveyed in a way that articulates its societal value through the proposal of a ‘translation – circulation – consolidation’ model that “suggests that arts and humanities researchers could be more sanguine, as it argues for the value of autonomous research as a part of a mass generation of ideas, some of which will ultimately make substantial societal differences” (p. 58). This does not entirely separate the arts and humanities from other fields such as those that fall within the STEM category. Rather, this model Benneworth proposes aims to adapt the same concepts in a way that is tailored to the arts and humanities so that they may be evaluated equally. Brown and Novak-Leonard (2013) share that “a concern of artists and arts practitioners is that audience impact results will be misused or misinterpreted by arts funders to make funding decisions, and that quantitative measures can never convey the impact of an arts experience” (p. 231). The arts are ultimately about human experience and finding ways to quantify that is virtually impossible.

Conversations about the importance of the arts, how the arts are evaluated, and the perceptions individuals often have concerning the value of the arts are constantly developing.

Although there have been many attempts to convey the importance of all-encompassing approaches, the overwhelming majority of research that is conducted in favor of the arts revolves around quantitative approaches. While it is vital to be aware of economic influence, demographics, etc. it is equally important to conduct qualitative analyses in order to understand the larger impact that the arts have on individuals and society. There are many studies that explore how the arts are currently evaluated, the implications that accompany assessing value through a very limited lens and significance in recognizing alternative approaches that adequately convey the impact of the arts. Despite the realization that alternative approaches are necessary, however, there are a limited number of studies that apply the concepts and practices that many studies claim are necessary for a more encompassing evaluation of the arts

METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study is to answer the following questions: (1) What is significant about the qualitative impact of the arts? (2) How can qualitative impact be effectively and accurately measured? and (3) Why is access to the arts important?

I filmed a documentary that studies the *qualitative* impact of the arts. The goal was to answer the research questions I have presented through the conduction of interviews and documentation of arts creation and participation. Interviews were conducted with members of the community, artists and those who work in the arts sector. My ultimate goal was to allow each individual to guide the narrative based upon their own experiences. Hurley, Linsley, Rowe and Fontanella (2013) address the stigmas that individuals with mental health issues face and the unfair treatment these individuals receive as they point out how extensive research has been done

on how creating art impacts individuals, but not much exists on how the created art impacts those who interact with it. In an attempt to evaluate how interacting with created art impacts perceived notions towards mental health issues and how it also impacts an individual's own mental health practices, they conduct a study focused intently on individual experiences while utilizing qualitative measures as a method of evaluation.

Hurley et al. (2014) state, "art, as described in the present study, provides a system of communication in which the young people could not only express themselves, but more importantly, be potentially understood and accepted as contributing to their community" (p. 423). This study applies the same methods in a context very different from the one I conducted and provided a framework that supported my own research. Hurley et al. (2014) state "this study reinforced the role that art can and does play in promoting dialogue on mental health and illness" (p. 424). Not only does this support the argument that a more encompassing approach is needed to evaluate the arts, it provides a concrete example of how one can successfully do so.

The documentary I have produced focuses on a similarly qualitative approach to the evaluation of the arts while conveying to viewers the impact the arts have and allowing them to experience art for themselves. The use of film is vital because it allows me to present my research in a way that is accessible to a larger audience and conveys some of the immeasurable aspects of art that I am trying to identify and explore. Justifying what efforts are worth supporting and why it is important to make art accessible to all individuals can be difficult. Exploring the importance of the arts on an individual level highlights the value in looking past dominant standards that determine what is considered worthy based on perceptions of wealth and prestige. A significant component of art is personal experience. Numerous individuals can interact with the same piece of art and be impacted in completely different ways. It is this

personal impact that I seek to evaluate through the conduction of interviews as I explore how art impacts both those who create and those who observe.

DOCUMENTARY

<https://youtu.be/p8ApRs1v1pQ>

REFLECTION

When I first began this thesis process, I knew that I wanted to involve the arts somehow, but I had no idea how I planned to do so. I grew up dancing, and when I began conducting research I realized that a majority of what I saw revolved around quantitative measures, ranging from economic to neurological impact. While these facts and figures were interesting, there was nothing in the research that I could relate to because what impacted me the most could never be quantified. Formulating a plan to explore the qualitative impact of the arts proved to be challenging, but the stories I got to hear and experiences I got a glimpse into were priceless. I had five participants: Christen Boone, President and CEO of Fund for the Arts, Hallie Dizdarevic, Associate Artistic Director at Commonwealth Theatre Center, Chris and Cliff, both Shakespeare Behind Bars Participants, and Matthew Jablow, an arts participant and CTC parent. The footage I collected of arts events came from classes and rehearsals at Commonwealth Theatre Center. Although I had hours of footage, I included only 20 minutes of bits and pieces from each person and experience in an attempt to share a fragment of what I was exposed to during this process.

I had a very diverse group of individuals and interesting perspectives for interviews. Christen and Hallie both work in the arts sector in Louisville and were able to offer their own

understanding of and participation in the arts, but they also offered a glimpse into what advocating for the arts really looks like. Throughout the interviews it became clear that both qualitative and quantitative methods are needed in order to successfully communicate the value of the arts to diverse individuals. Hallie expressed a strong preference for qualitative methods and admitted to resisting quantitative evaluation in the past. However, she shared that she grew to recognize the value in quantitative evaluations as well as she has maintained roles as an arts facilitator. Christen, on the other hand, was a strong advocate for both quantitative and qualitative evaluation. She appealed to the reality that not everyone thinks the same, and there is a necessity to be able to communicate both as an arts advocate. There are some very powerful ways to evaluate the arts, both quantitative and qualitative, but as Hallie shared there are some things that cannot be quantified.

During my interviews with each participant I was able to find moments where the arts built connections, both for communities and individuals. The arts allow people to engage in shared experiences, and this process revealed how powerful those experiences can be. One does not have to listen to a song, watch a performance or view a sculpture at the same moment in order to engage in conversation about it. I found myself having conversations about various shows, movies and life experiences with the arts that enabled me to connect with each individual that I spoke to. I learned that it is entirely possible to measure the value of the arts qualitatively, you just have to let people speak and be willing to listen. Chris and Cliff participated in the same program, and for a while at the same time. Their experiences and the impact the program had on them share a few significant similarities, but each of their stories is entirely unique to them. Their engagement with the arts also extends far beyond this single program, and it is clear that they have been able to not only connect with others through art but also allowed them to grow as

individuals. Individual growth was a common thread that applied to each person I spoke to as well. Matt discussed the role of art in his life as an individual and the impact he has seen it have on his kids. He shared how he stopped writing plays for years after being heavily involved, but once he got back into it, he did it simply because it's something he loves to do. That desire to be a part of the arts not for monetary gain or recognition, but because you truly love it is something Matt described as being difficult to explain to those who are not involved in the arts. This project made it increasingly clear that the impact the arts have on people's lives is something that can never be quantified, and the necessity to utilize that as a tool to communicate value is growing.

Recognizing and understanding the importance of the arts in our society and to our communities is essential. While it is important to evaluate how many individuals are impacted and maximize the amount who benefit, the influence on an individual level is extremely crucial. The arts at their core are qualitative in nature because they are born from the experiences of those who create them and continue to impact individuals in ways that cannot be measured quantitatively. We must be more willing to look beyond the numbers and explore what really drives people and how the arts truly influence people's lives. The profound impact that some things have cannot always be explained, and attempts to prove effectiveness and worth through data ignores a significant aspect of how the arts function in our lives. The moments where we are left struggling to express how deeply something spoke to us can be some of the most important, and finding a way to share that in an attempt to evaluate and advocate for the arts is vital.

Data plays a crucial role in funding as it allows donors to see how funds are allocated and the resulting impact so that organizations, artists, etc. can secure continued support. The issue is that this data will never be able to tell the full story. I am not suggesting that we ignore the quantitative data entirely, but relying on it so heavily is just as dangerous as ignoring it

completely. Attempting to evaluate the qualitative aspect of the arts helps highlight a different side of why the arts are important, there is power in the influence of personal stories and experiences. There are challenges that accompany a qualitative approach, however, because measuring the qualitative impact, especially of the arts, is not done very often. In addition, the arts are often seen as less important than other fields. This comparison of the arts to subjects that are completely different and assigning value based off of limited criteria makes it even more difficult. However, it also strengthens the argument for more qualitative assessments of the arts because it is essential that the research conducted has a clear intention and produces accurate and thorough results.

While filming I did my best to allow each individual to direct the narrative. I did not want to guide them to a specific conclusion or outcome so that I may truly capture their opinion and experience. I did of course have some targeted questions, but I attempted to make them objective so that the responses I got did not simply reflect what I wanted to hear. There were limitations to my study, however, and there is so much that can still be done in an attempt to discover how to effectively measure the qualitative impact of the arts. I conducted my interviews within a very specific area, and a majority of my participants were involved with theatre. This is a challenge because not everyone will connect with theatre or with how the arts exist in the Greater Louisville community. Future research could expand the area that individuals come from as well as include various other arts activities. I also could not include the entirety of each interview, so while I tried my best to provide a fair and honest portrayal of what each individual said, there was only so much I could include. This is a challenge that anyone who produces a film must face, however, so other than changing the structure to focus on one individual at a time that is an obstacle that would be difficult to overcome. However, storytelling does not have to include the

entire narrative in order to communicate the message. I was also very limited on who I could interview. I was not able to cast a wide net and interview anyone in Louisville who would want to participate, so there are many viewpoints and perspectives that I did not include within one city alone and many more could be explored in the future.

Various aspects of each individual's life impacted the interaction they had with the arts throughout their lives, and it is important to consider how altering just a few factors can drastically change someone's life. Every participant highlighted how important the arts have been to them and/or their communities, and it became clearer with each interview that it is entirely possible to communicate the qualitative impact of the arts. While it does seem that numbers are quicker to communicate and understand, personal stories highlight why the arts are truly important. Quantitative research is important, but at the end of the day it is fueled by qualitative factors. We would not be able to collect data about high school graduation rates or economic impact if people were not interested in participating in the first place, so it is worth it to figure out why they are invested. People participate in the arts because they want to and because of how it makes them feel, the numbers are a result of something much larger.

Even when people are at work or at home, as we find ourselves now, they find a way to engage with the arts. As I reflected on my project as a whole, I could not ignore the ways in which COVID-19 has impacted the arts. During a time when we are all in our homes many have turned to the arts to stay active and entertained. Arts organizations may be suffering now and unable to communicate engagement accurately to donors, but many have begun offering ways for people to engage online. Instagram art clubs, live-streaming concerts and performances, and museum collections made available online are just a few of the creative ways people are finding to engage with the arts. That is in addition to streaming platforms like Netflix and Hulu that are

normally present in our daily lives. Art is present everywhere, and for some it is present in ways that have become so normal it is almost disregarded. From all of the shows that are binge watched to the art galleries that people attend, art plays a role in the lives of many and we must start considering how we assign value in order to justify participation and funding. Matt shared an interesting perspective, every kid needs something to be involved in and whether that be the arts, sports, sciences, etc. we need to provide the opportunity for them to explore and be involved. The arts are often one of the first things to go when funding becomes an issue, and it is essential that we begin taking steps to reevaluate how we view the arts as a society. It is clear that there will always be a place for facts and figures, as well as a place for how the arts impact people and communities on a personal level. However, after all of my research and time spent producing this documentary it is even more clear that we must capitalize on the qualitative aspect of arts evaluation more intentionally. Attempting to quantify the human aspect of the arts is impractical. An honest and intentional attempt to focus on the stories people have to share and allowing individuals to experience art and come together is the first step to a qualitative approach.

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