Two-Way Mirror

Ethnography as a Way to Assess Civic Impact of Arts-Based Engagement in Tucson, Arizona

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Tucson Pima Arts Council (TPAC)

TPAC is the designated local arts agency for the City of Tucson and Pima County, providing grants, technical assistance, and community arts development support to southern Arizona. The agency also initiates and leads several special cultural and planning projects of regional significance.

As a quasi-governmental intermediary, TPAC itself is not an arts-producing entity. The agency's mission is to foster artistic expression, educational development, and the economic growth of the region's diverse community by supporting, promoting, and advocating for arts and culture.

Finding Voice

In 2008-2009, University of Arizona Research Social Scientist Maribel Alvarez and TPAC's Executive Director Roberto Bedoya and Community Arts Development Coordinator Leia Maahs collaborated to develop a conceptual framework to assess how TPAC could align its vision, language, and protocols to support work that fosters arts-based civic engagement.
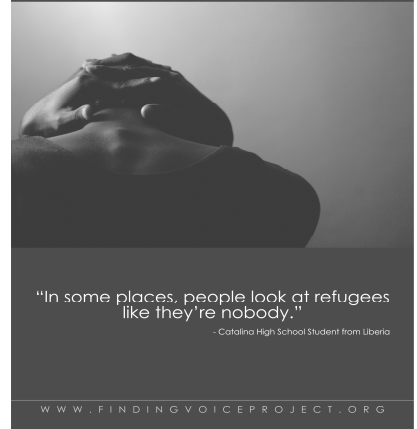
Key to TPAC's role as an agency accountable to the public is its need to capture data that measures the impact of its programs in the community. The exploration by Alvarez, Bedoya, and Maahs was motivated by the desire to find innovative ways of evaluating civic impact that could enhance TPAC's role as more than just a funder or grants administrator. The team turned to exploring forms of qualitative data as a resource in this quest.

This monograph captures highlights of their joint learning process through the case study of one specific project, Finding Voice.

Finding Voice is an innovative literacy and visual arts program funded largely by Every Voice in Action Foundation and Tucson Pima Arts Council (TPAC). The mission of Every Voice in Action Foundation is to *ignite and support youth voice, infusing the community with the unique perspectives of young people*. Specifically, its goals are to encourage and support youth voices from all groups—with special emphasis on the majority of youth who do not currently voice their opinions and ideas at a community level—and to increase the number of youth in decision-making roles.

Finding Voice's project-based curriculum is dedicated to helping refugee and immigrant youth in LEARN Center/Advanced ESL classes at Catalina Magnet High School in Tucson, develop literacy and second language skills.

A NEW COUNTRY, A NEW LIFE:
Tucson Teens Share Their Experiences with War & Immigration

"In some places, people look at refugees like they're nobody."
- Catalina High School Student from Liberia

WWW.FINDINGVOICEPROJECT.ORG

Youth from Afghanistan, Ghana, Honduras, Iraq, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Mexico, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Russia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, and other countries work through the creative process of brainstorming, researching, drafting, revising, editing, and finally publishing their writing and photography to produce powerful and thought-provoking art about critical social issues in their lives and communities.

The project began in 2006 as a collaboration between the Tucson chapter of the International Rescue Committee, Julie Kasper (ESL/English teacher, Catalina Magnet High School), and Josh Schachter (Tucson based-photographer, educator, and cultural activist). TPAC joined Finding Voice in 2007. When Finding Voice moved out of the classroom and into the public sphere, TPAC deepened its involvement with the project by offering animating methods of arts-based civic engagement.

Ethnography and Evaluation

A basic definition of ethnography might be a method of analysis common to anthropology that emphasizes listening carefully and observing real-life actions to understand how people make sense of their lives (and making those understandings comprehensible to others outside the particular groups under study).

As a tool for evaluation, ethnographic approaches favor first-hand observation, documentation of stories, and community dialogue. An ethnographic evaluation produces data collection of a distinct kind — subjective accounts of how people *actually* interact with systems, programs, and policies. This data is collected through experiences of the

evaluator in the field, side by side with participants.

More than simply a way to glean information about how many people received services or how efficient a program runs, ethnographic data attempts to measure what is *meaningful* to people and how they see themselves in relationship to the social dynamics that surround them.

> Our lives are merely a collection of incidents until we create the narrative that gives them meaning. Until we tell our own story in our minds or in any concrete form, true understanding is impossible. Individually and collectively, the way we craft our stories shapes our lives.
>
> **Arlene Goldbard
> Author and Cultural Policy Advocate**

Stewardship

As a local arts agency in one of the most spectacular natural environments in the United States —the Sonoran Desert overlapping the U.S. Mexico border— TPAC is acutely attuned to the power of the concept of place as a key principle for art-making.

Tied to place, the idea of *stewardship* has emerged as a strong regional value among policy makers. In the simplest terms, stewardship is the responsibility for the managing of something entrusted to one's care.

The 2007 TPAC-led *Pima Cultural Plan: Needs Assessment and Strategies* stressed stewardship as a core principle for understanding the region's cultural assets. There is evi-

dent pride locally on being thoughtful stewards of the land (manifested, for example, in the preservation of open spaces) and on the importance of place as part of everyday life and identity (for instance, expressed in the history of Tucson barrios and the existence of many vibrant neighborhood associations).

For Bedoya, the charge of stewardship reaches farther: "As an arts agency we are also stewards of imagination," he says. Stewardship is a key ingredient for creating the conditions necessary for a healthy democracy. Adapting the concept of " social imaginary" from

philosopher Charles Taylor, Bedoya stresses how art activates the images, stories, and legends through which ordinary people imagine how they fit with others in society.

"Stewardship emboldens the aesthetic contract between artists and audiences," says Bedoya, "by paying attention to the call-and-response context of this relationship."

As a measure of the impact of art organizations beyond budget size or number of people served, the concept of stewardship opens the door for a conversation about what aspects of art-making should really matter as a social good.

Measuring Arts Impact

An inquiry haunts art advocates everywhere: How can artists and art organizations measure the impact of what they do to advance human transformation?

In a sense, this is the quintessential Catch-22 question: *What is the best way to measure what is in essence immeasurable?* When the specific impact of an arts intervention is tangled up with questions of societal change and civic engagement, the stakes as well as the difficulties grow exponentially. For instance, one is compelled to ask if civic engagement is a *measure* or a *means* of social change?

Anecdotal evidence abounds about art projects that have had profound effects on social conditions, but when it comes to providing data to make a case for more support, few organizations or artists have the tools, skills, or resources to demonstrate concrete evidence of their value.

Making a better case for the arts as a civic engagement strategy, however, may require a lot more than simply better research studies and performance benchmarks. It may require a change in our basic assumptions about (a) who should evaluate whom; (b) what constitutes good data; and (c) how information is shared with key stakeholders (which in the case of a publicly-supported agency, includes taxpayers).

For TPAC this re-conceptualization involved the following elements:

1) an expanded role for the TPAC program manager as an observer-participant invested in an ongoing dialogue with the artist, teacher, youth, public officials, and the public (in essence, a re-thinking of a manager's job description);

2) an active and sustained opportunity for program participants them selves (for instance, the youth) to reflect on what impact the program had, with ample opportunities for writing and speaking publicly about the larger dimensions of social as well as personal transformation their work set in motion;

3) the validation of stories and detailed subjective accounts of events and experiences, open-ended interviews, blogs, public art, and public happenings (all part of creative uses of media and qualitative data) as sources of evaluation data; and

4) a commitment to create an open portal for sharing evaluation information with the public at large in a deliberative and non-didactic, non-traditional *grantspeak* fashion (as evidenced in the website ARTivism and in this monograph).

Most methodologies for cultural policy research are derived from the discourses and practices of public policy. This borrowing has created many problems for analysis related to creativity and imagination. Policy studies is a field that overwhelmingly embraces *policy* as an empirical science that separates facts from value. Within the cultural policy field this separation fails to engage with the utopian and ideological goals and effects of empowering talent and community that animate community-based organizations.

Roberto Bedoya
Deliberative Cultural Policy Practices, Cultural Commons, May 2006

Deliberating Impact:
What are we *really* measuring?

This is a story of how one arts council took one art project and turned it into a tool to activate a variety of social agents and to think differently about arts and its value by approaching its work and social function in a viral way. In seeking to *animate democracy*, TPAC animated its own role as convener and prompted a belief in civic engagement.

Maribel Alvarez, Ph.D.
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The evaluation process described in this monograph involved two inter-related but substantially distinct inquiries.
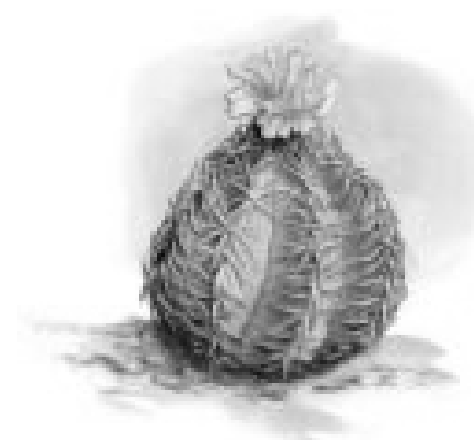
One inquiry concerned measuring the impact of the Finding Voice project *in and of itself* as an arts-based example of civic engagement. This inquiry is familiar to arts practitioners and advocates; it basically asks direct questions of content, methodology, delivery, and testimonies of participation. Inasmuch as Finding Voice is also a youth project and a school-based intervention, there is ample room for dynamic conversations about matters of empowerment, social organizing, and arts education that have traditionally interested artists and programmers.

Because of the richness of experiences inherent to the project through its participants and their art interventions, this is in some ways an easier or more compelling conversation to have and to report on. Art and the lives that art impacts are, afterall, at the heart of why we do what we do in arts-based civic engagement projects.

A second inquiry —hard to separate from the rich content base of Finding Voice, yet different in the kinds of questions it posed of the project— concerned the organizational dynamics, protocols, and mechanics of TPAC, which saw in Finding Voice a model for how to advance its own organizational work in a direction more compatible with the goals of civic engagement. For TPAC, Finding Voice was at one level a case study; it was also a model for what could happen if more of TPAC's organizational mechanics could be aligned to support the kinds of social questions that Finding Voice addressed.

Bedoya captured the essence of this aspiration when he stated that for him the Finding Voice experience was fundamentally about "how to turn an arts council from being an ATM machine to being catalytic of broader changes in social discourse."

In practice, this intriguing challenge TPAC assigned itself translated to how to find resources (money and staff) to expand, spread, or replicate the Finding Voice model —first and foremost as a skill-building aid for artists interested in civic engagement work— and secondarily as a process that would lead to a realignment of how the arts council was organized and functioned in the larger ecology of arts policy in the region. In other words, TPAC wanted to explore whether it was possible to be a different kind of arts council than conventionally defined.
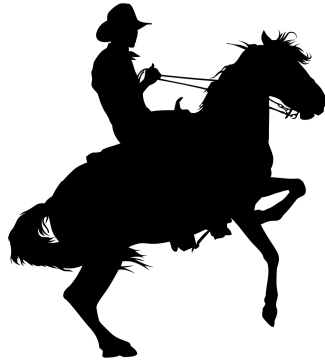
Field Conversations (#1)

Leia Maahs: When the Finding Voice works entered the public realm, what was the level of public critique?

Josh Schachter: Western Art conceives of completed works as the ultimate outcome and has not yet established a place for process-oriented works. At what point do we break down this paradigm and begin inserting a new expectation of cultural aesthetics?

Leia: But do governmental restrictions affect the quality of arts-based civic engagement work with high school youth?

Josh: The consistent increases of standardized tests compromise the project's ability to work inside and outside of the classroom. If the state and federal government don't measure success in the same way we do, we are always trying to fit into another framework. The framework we establish with the Advanced ESL class is based on animating citizenship as well as introducing civic platforms for youth voice. The students are learning a new language, a new art form, and then are asked to evaluate their civic landscape. Through photography, writing, research, and digital storytelling they articulate what they are experiencing as immigrants and refugees. The inevitable result is a group of new immigrant and refugee youth who are making associations based on their experiences in their native countries as well as animating democracy —exercising their rights as residents of Tucson, Arizona to describe the ways in which they are or are not assimilating into American culture through democratic processes.

Node vs. Hub

The Finding Voice project challenged TPAC's understanding of its own role in the larger arts ecology of Southern Arizona. In lieu of the conventional notion of an arts council serving as a "hub" that processes cultural grants and that through an allocations model ensures the healthy development of the arts sector, the idea of the agency functioning instead as a "node" within a network of animated social relationships gained currency.

"The effect we seek," said Maahs, "is radial; what comes in, goes out and feeds a loop of practitioner-derived knowledge. That's how we have cultivated non-arts based community partnerships and civic stakeholders in the community. TPAC supports the artist residencies; however, without nodal partnerships —such as the Every Voice In Action Foundation— the residencies would not develop the level of impact TPAC seeks to foster. TPAC's self-identified definition as a node organically cultivates the organization's guiding principle of cultural stewardship by sharing resources, best practices, and building a greater social awareness of civic engagement programs in the region."

In a node model, the main product that TPAC produces is relationships. Thus, the success of a project like Finding Voice depends on the active buy-in (in both execution and evaluation) of the youth participants, artist and teacher, the school district, the refugee agency, two local private foundations, City Council members, and the public that reacts to the work.

HUB: The center part of a wheel, fan, or propeller. A center of activity or interest; a focal point.

NODE: Point of intersection; in a communications network, a connection spot, often a redistribution point.
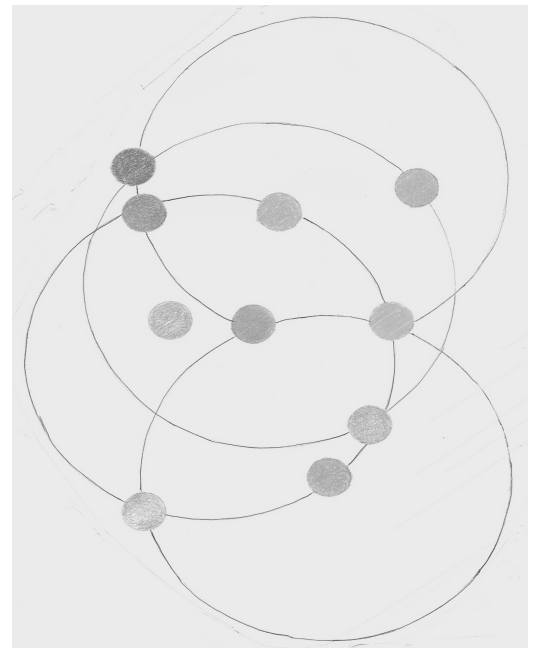
The Ethnographic Approach:
What exactly is to be done?

Ask Maahs what made her assessment of the Finding Voice project's civic impact different from any other residency she had evaluated previously and her answer comes through unequivocally: "I stepped away from my desk."

Succinct as it may be, her reply captures the essence of the ethnographic approach to data collection for research or evaluation purposes. Ethnographic methods, more than any other form of qualitative method, are premised on the assumption that personal engagement with participants in a program or art activity is *the key* to understanding the particular impact of that project. The kind of understanding that an ethnographic method aspires to obtain is the subjective, up-close, and experiential type. In order to get close to meeting that goal, the ethnographer or evaluator must immerse herself in the same field of social and creative action that the people she hopes to learn from experience in their everyday lives.

In the anthropological tradition, this deliberate action of stepping out of one's work and living environment to enter the world of others is called fieldwork.

Clearly, making a decision to evaluate a program through ethnographic means has immediate advantages and a few potential disadvantages. The most notable advantage is that the evaluation will yield data that will be deeper, more meaningful, more attentive to context, and substantially more complex and emotive. It is precisely the desire to get a deeper understanding of **what is really important to people** —beyond what is captured by questionnaires or surveys— that has attracted many program managers to ethnographic methods of evaluation.

Many large corporations such as Microsoft and Sony employ ethnographers to conduct market research studies among real consumers in real life situations. The main motivation behind this decision has been the recognition that what people say does not always match what they do. Similarly, for many artists and art managers it is no longer satisfying to tabulate the answers of a post-production questionnaire where people mark "on a scale of 1 to 5 how much did you enjoy the show?" The need for understanding the impact on someone's life of being a participant in an arts-based civic-engagement project quickly raises the bar on evaluation and moves beyond tabulation to a documentation of stories of transformation and narratives of meaning-making.

Two potential disadvantages of an ethnographic evaluation are that it is time consuming and that its depth of information is limited to one project at a time. In addition, the analysis that emerges from an ethnographic study is always interpretative —that is, based on narrative descriptions that emphasize local context, introspection, and an extensive range of meaningful and affective perspectives.

While in shorthand, fieldwork has been described as "being out and about" with the subjects of one's interest, there are in fact a number of distinct methodologies or strategies that ethnographers employ in the field. Among the most common ones are open-ended interviews, observation, participation, informal conversations, document analysis, and analysis of key themes and discourses employed by the participants. The method known as participant-observation is unique to ethnography in that it embodies the dual actions of actively listening to someone else's point of view while simultaneously attempting to reflect on and compose a broader narrative of one's own about what that person is saying. One ethnographer has suggested that the charge here is to "understand as an insider, but describe as an outsider."
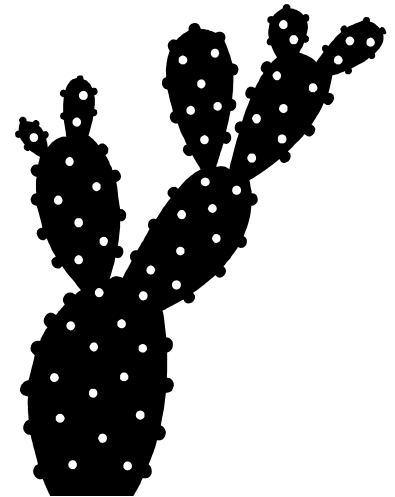
For Maahs, the combination of these methods over a period of nine months contributed to her conclusion that the impact of the Finding Voice project resided primarily in the sense of purpose and citizenship that it fostered in the youth and the tight tapestry of social exchanges and points of contact that the project wove among various sectors in the local arts ecology.

How Finding Voice Utilized the Ethnographic Approach to Evaluation

Emphasizing the value of qualitative evaluation methods such as ethnographic participant-observation and storytelling does not mean coming up short on actual, tangible data.

The Finding Voice project utilized a diversity of metric instruments to gauge participants' involvement. In turn, TPAC employed an ethnographic lens to collect systematic qualitative data from Finding Voice to assess the question of civic impact.

Together, the two evaluation mechanisms (an internal self-assessment by Finding Voice and an external case-study examination of Finding Voice by TPAC) combined to create multiple opportunities for public feedback, auto-critique, and the elaboration of a social discourse of civic engagement.

In short, these methods affirmed a comprehensive *culture of dialogue* among all parties involved in or touched by Finding Voice (and TPAC by extension).

The metrics of evaluation employed by Finding Voice participants —driven by them, designed by them, and ultimately reflective of their sense of purpose and meaningfulness— hence of their notion of civic impact— can be roughly divided into four categories.

First, the project utilized several **instruments commonly found in standard evaluations**. Among these, Finding Voice:

- designed and collected an audience survey for attendees at their exhibits;

- staged a series of learning exchanges or focus group meetings among participants; and

- kept a count of the number of people who attended exhibits or other public events.

Secondly, Finding Voice assessed the **execution and delivery of its own program elements** as measures of success. Among these were:

- the completion of school-based curricular goals;

- the creation of new works of art by the youth;

- the emergence of sustained dialogue and introspective auto-critique by and among youth;

- the offering of TPAC youth internships to four Finding Voice participants; and

- the installment of civic stewardship among youth by expanding their social capital through building relationships with individuals and institutions in the community.

Thirdly, a number of **tangible products** emerged out of Finding Voice.

- Bus shelter posters;

- A book of writings and photographs;

- A magazine written and designed by youth;

- Media coverage in local newspapers;

- A GIS interactive map illustrating location of participants in the ARTivism exhibit;

- ARTivism and Finding Voice websites;

- Exhibits in galleries.

Lastly, a number of **discourse strategies** extended the depth and reach of the three sets of metrics mentioned above.

- A series of community forums where the youth spoke of their experiences;

- A blog where youth recorded testimonies and reflections;

- A number of public talks and discussions in conjunction with the exhibits; and

- Dialogue with politicians, policy makers and non-governmental organizations through meetings, congressional hearings, etc.

Charting Changes in Civil Society

Discourse

Protocols

Skills
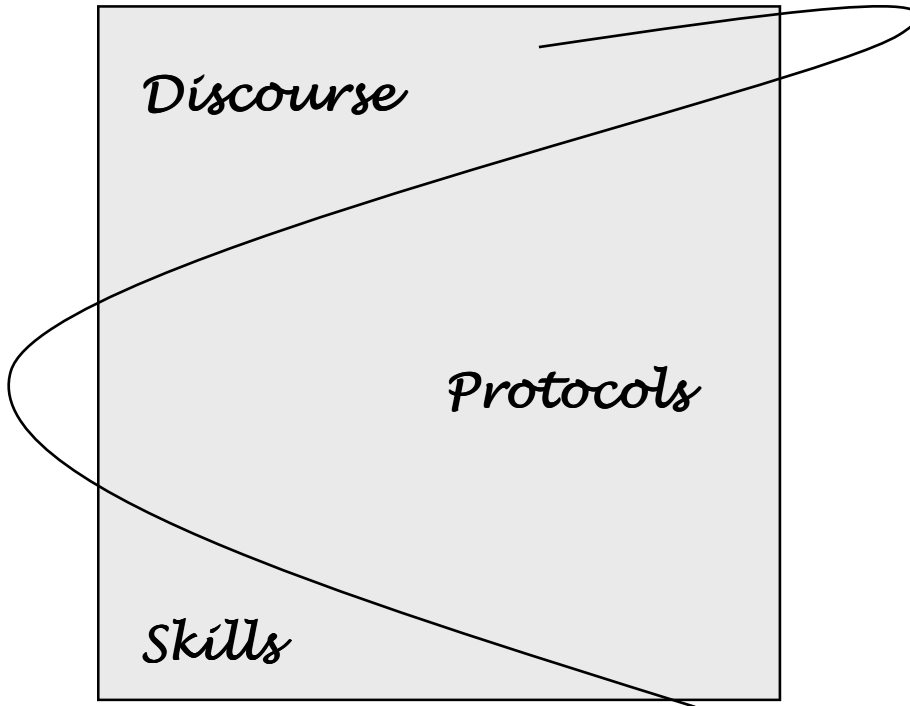
The greatest challenge in any evaluation is the question "so what?" When asked in the abstract, this question too often hampers the actual possibilities for social change rather than affirm them. Not unlike the question "what is the meaning of life," this type of inquiry can easily leave the person who asks it in the limbo of uncertainty or worse, cynicism.

In his extremely interesting book, *Community Action and Organizational Change*, Professor Brenton Faber, Ph.D. outlines five constituting features of change: identity, communication, narratives and images, discordance, and reconstitution. Faber's main argument is that when all is said and done, change always takes place in the realm of narrative because the stories people tell frame what they think is *possible to think* in the first instance.

This simple truth stands today, for better or for worse, at the core of what constitutes the struggle in society to influence and shift social discourse for or against specific directions. Whether the struggle in question is taking place in the halls of Congress or in the commercial breaks between our favorite TV shows, policy changes are widely recognized as being a result of language usage that gains traction, legitimacy, and ultimately deliver "outcomes" in the form of new laws, regulations, and protocols.

Thus, for TPAC and Finding Voice the challenge of evaluation was from the start cast as a question of how far the stories of change they were documenting could go in changing practical conditions of social life in Pima County.

For Josh Schachter, the artist/teacher working with the youth, for example, the question of change became at times as concrete as asking how it would be possible through the "arts-based activism" of Finding Voice to extend the period of support that refugee families receive from the international refugee agencies from four to eight months. His enthusiasm for the subjective and qualitative outcomes of Finding Voice was shadowed at times by his frustration at not being able to impact the actual policies of refugee resettlement—at least not in the short term of Finding Voice's project scope.

For TPAC, the challenges and occasional frustrations were of a different order. The Finding Voice case study provided solid evidence that it was possible to reshape the role of the grants manager to one of partnership and catalytic agent. It also made convincingly clear that an arts agency can leverage triple or quadruple its limited financial resources by building relationships in nodal fashion. TPAC also had to contend with the realization that its collaboration with Finding Voice was only a small part of its overall scope of work and mandate. In a paradoxical way, the case study approach contributed to the singularity and exceptionalism of the Finding Voice experience. Hence, the question remained: How can the "ethos of practice" of Finding Voice be replicated?

> That's the question that keeps me up at night. We put the voices out there, but are we doing enough to facilitate a dialogue?
>
> **Josh Schachter,
> Finding Voice
> Artist/Teacher**

Evaluation as Storytelling

In a compelling talk delivered in 2008, the cultural policy expert Arlene Goldbard contrasted two imaginary *regimes* of arts evaluation: Datastan and Storyland. She described Datastan in less-than-kind terms as "a flatland nightmare that worships hyper-efficiency and hyper-rationality." Storyland, in contrast, was dubbed a "numinous landscape infused with multiple types of knowledge." Goldbard argued that the key distinction between these two regimes boiled down to the emphasis each placed on or downplayed in terms of art as *process*, or what she called "the flow of creativity."

As she saw it, two key principles derive from the value of flow. First, the impact of art is never done even when the data is all counted; art keeps impacting insofar as it keeps unfolding at yet-to-be discovered levels of experience and insight. Reducing it to a set of quantifiable data creates a false sense of closure. Two, the only way to catch a glimpse of that ongoing process at work is to listen to those whom art impacts speak their own words in their own voice through speaking technologies and methodologies friendly to dialogue.

Through the Finding Voice project, TPAC implemented a qualitative methodology of storytelling as the benchmark of evaluation. Stories were seen as the research units that gauged whether the project was successful or not.

A fundamental value in this approach was that the production of data on the project's impact had to be playful and convivial—that is, it had to grow from and be embedded in the art-making itself. The most effective stories of impact were thus gleaned by TPAC's staff, the artist, and the teacher through informal time spent with participants, Web entries, journal writing, one-on-one interviews, and anecdotes shared at public events. Though informal, these bits of data were collected systematically and deliberately and utilized in the writing of a project impact narrative by TPAC staff.

> Finding Voice helped me identify my strengths and weaknesses. 'Impact' to me means....many people encouraging you to do things you never knew you could do.
>
> **Amani Thal**
> **Finding Voice Youth (Sudan)**

Field Conversations (#2)

Leia: Josh, the name of this project is Finding Voice; tell me, what is Voice to you?

Josh: Voice is an iterative process that evolves as we evolve.

In my mind, Voice involves the following eight key principles:

1) the exploration of the "I" and the "We" (the larger community) and the relationship between the two;

2) awareness of possible tools (photography, writing, etc) for expressing one's self and community;

3) development of a fundamental understanding of the language and power of those tools (language of photography, digital storytelling, etc.);

4) studying and observing of how others have developed their voice using those tools and languages;

5) experimentation with the how-to of applying these tools in one's own life and community;

6) development of a greater understanding of the nuances of the tools' languages by reflecting on one's creative expression using these tools;

7) thoughtful articulation of what one wants to express based on this greater understanding; and

8) sharing one's creative expression with a larger audience, reflection on how the larger audience received your creative expression, and further development and refinement of one's creative expression/voice.

Measures of Success

(How TPAC supported a community of art-based civic animators)

For TPAC, the Finding Voice project represented a large aspiration.

By financially supporting a project that sought to integrate the voices of immigrant and refugee youth in the civic fabric of the Tucson community, TPAC hoped to demonstrate that the arts can play a role in issues that contribute to the big picture of the region's social landscape. Ultimately, TPAC hoped to use the Finding Voice pilot project to prove to the agency stakeholders that it was possible to reshape the traditional artist residency grants program into a sustained effort of art-based civic engagement work that other artists and organizations would want to emulate.

TPAC saw this as a strategic opportunity to include this field of art-making deliberately into its grantmaking priorities. A secondary goal was to insert artists and art practices informed by the distinctive social and cultural landscape of Southern Arizona into national conversations taking place around democracy, cultural citizenship, and the role of artists in society.

The challenge for TPAC, from a case-making point of view to public officials and stakeholders, was how to move the concept of civic engagement from an abstraction to a demonstrable practice. The challenge involved more than ideology and persuasion. As Bedoya

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" I don't want to leave my present."
- Catalina High School Student from Mexico

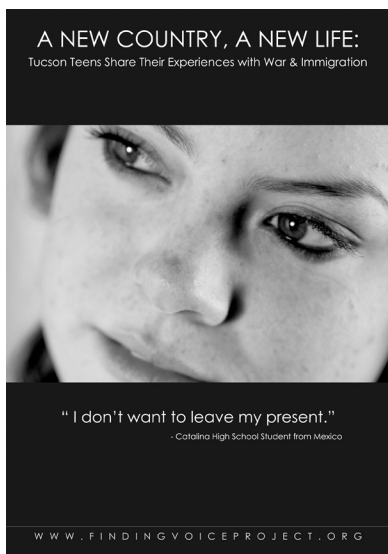W W W . F I N D I N G V O I C E P R O J E C T . O R G

and Maahs began their involvement with Finding Voice, they found elected officials and board members receptive to, and in some cases even enthusiastic about, the new language of civic participation. However, as Bedoya stated repeatedly throughout the evaluation discussions, "liking the language is not enough; when public officials begin to use it as part of how they understand the work and value of TPAC, then we would have succeeded."

This self-imposed mandate to shift the core conception of what an arts agency ought to be doing—other than meeting the minimal expectation of doling out funds from the public purse to non-governmental organizations— was a tall order. As Maahs described it at the beginning of the evaluation endeavor, the driving goal of singling out Finding Voice as a model of best practices of civic-engagement was precisely "not to make Finding Voice a one-only project." In order to move the discussion in this direction, TPAC reckoned that it first had to put into evidence what the anatomy of a strong arts-based civic engagement project looked like.

Two centrifugal forces were key to this endeavor. First, TPAC's organizational structure and operating demands required it not to be the leading art producer; the agency's optimal role would be one of instigator, prompter, catalyst, and connector. Secondly, if the work itself —what artists did and how they went about doing it— was to be different, so must be the measures used to evaluate whether civic-oriented art practices were successful or not. In other words, as Bedoya expressed in an early meeting, "quantitative data, the usual fare of arts evaluation, cannot be the privileged source of knowledge for this kind of work; when it comes to making a case for art-based civic engagement *data* needs to be supplemented by *arguments* that reach people's hearts and minds."

BREAKING CONCEPTUAL GROUND

Maahs and Bedoya's intuition about evaluation was not baseless. Decades of arts evaluation studies have shed light on the limitations of applying a purely quantitative metric to measure the impact of artistic interventions. TPAC itself, for example, had kept meticulous data of number of grants awarded, people served, economic trickle effects of expenditures of the creative economy, and other data of this sort. In the end, the armature of evaluation remained resiliently linear in nature; it was able to account for things that happened in sequence and infer from them units of cost analysis, but it was largely ineffective in painting a compelling picture of the kinds of complex connections (the flows) that moved people to new understandings and

personal and collective transformations. The problem with quantitative measures is the tendency to reduce the whole to its parts (we know how many people came to the program, but we can't ascertain what they were thinking).

For TPAC, this pull towards quantitative reductionism led to another more serious ethical concern: the distinction between those who make art and those who receive it. This distinction is mirrored in the separation between those who participate in art activities and those who evaluate them. TPAC aspired to turn both of these paradigms upside down.
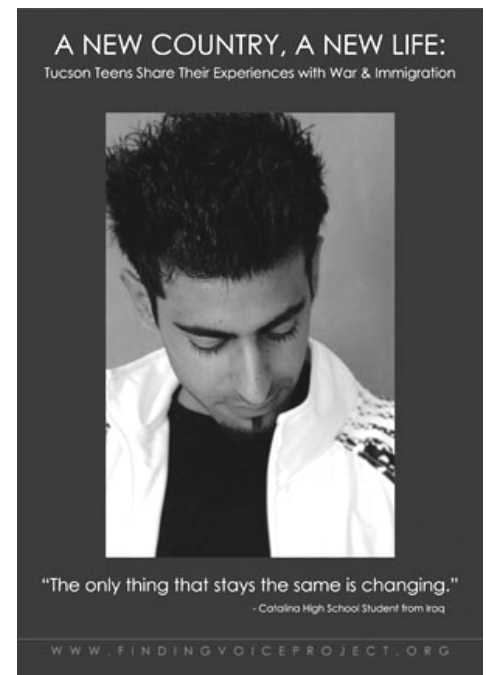
One of the core elements of art-making that surfaced early on in the Finding Voice project was the participatory nature of the activities. Arts-based civic engagement cannot be accomplished by lectures, power point presentations, or visits to a museum or theater—in other words, by the kind of exposure/outreach dyad that constitutes the core of many artist residencies. Arts-based civic engagement, as practiced by Josh Schachter and Julie Kasper, is nothing if not hands-on, active, participatory, and egalitarian. The youth were not audiences, they were creators; they were not spectators, they were participants.

This ethic of participation was the impetus for TPAC's decision to design an evaluation mechanism for the project that would dissolve (as much as possible) the distinction between gathering data and reporting it. In conceiving the evaluation rubric most fitting for TPAC's goal of case-making, Maahs and Bedoya envisioned a reconfigured job description for the conventional arts manager. Taking their cue from Finding Voice, the model of evaluation they favored stressed what Maribel Alvarez advised was most helpful about the ethnographic approaches pioneered by anthropologists—a model of sociability that lets you learn as you do, think as you practice, gather data as you hang out, and analyze things in terms of stories shared among co-narrators.

Thus, in the continuum of theories of social action inventoried by Mark Stern and Susan Seifert, the evaluation paradigm that TPAC chose favored extending *discursive approaches* that stress the role of the individual artist as *animateur* to the role TPAC would assign to itself as part of a nexus of enabling and empowering relationships. The frequency of intersecting relationships, not the number per se of participants or sightings became the measure of success of the project.

TENSIONS

To the extent that TPAC favored the metaphor of "node" for conceiving a matrix of evaluation, it followed that the distinguishing presence of knots (points of tension or entangling complications) would also emerge in the scenarios that TPAC faced as it delved into the practices of qualitative data gathering. On the positive side, it is clear that TPAC's involvement with Finding Voice provoked honest dialogue among staff and select stakeholders. Less positive, perhaps, were the ambiguities that the embrace of the Finding Voice model left lingering in the air with regards to how TPAC could move forward in revisiting its core approach to grantmaking. Tensions however, clarified Bedoya, need not be understood as hostility. In his view, tensions "invite further refinement" that art administrators often stop short of exploring. As Finding Voice unfolded and TPAC found itself playing an increasingly larger role in the flow of qualitative data gathering, two sets of complicated yet poignant questions emerged.

A NEW COUNTRY, A NEW LIFE:
Tucson Teens Share Their Experiences with War & Immigration

"The only thing that stays the same is changing."
- Catalina High School Student from Iraq

WWW.FINDINGVOICEPROJECT.ORG

Measures of Success ...continued

1) The delivery of goods of social and cultural value is at the heart of the public's expectations from a local arts agency. The arts community and public officials want TPAC to do more along the conventional mandate of distributing *more* funds, making *more* grants, advocating for *more* resources. In this sense, one can argue that the most pressing "civic engagement" matter that TPAC should be attending to is increasing resources for art-making, period. But is increasing monies and access to the arts the end-all of what TPAC has come to understand as civic engagement? Not at all. Procedural elements of how artists engage with the public are also crucial. Taking into account the limitations in funding that plague the Southern Arizona arts sector, how much bandwidth does TPAC really possess to insert a more proactive civic engagement agenda (activist art-making) into the existing structure?

2) In making Finding Voice the core case-study or demonstration project of civic engagement, TPAC's case-making has been opportunistic (i.e., the artists led, TPAC followed). The project was happening already and would have continued. How should TPAC maximize then the value that it brought to this intervention? Beyond ethnographic evidence, is TPAC in need of a more visible and convincing illustration of this nexus of activated relationships? Although Finding Voice is a rich and multi-layered endeavor, the project stands alone as a model in Pima County. How can projects like Finding Voice be duplicated in the face of diminishing public resources? TPAC planted the seed of arts-based civic engagement in its organizational terrain; moving forward, how can it grow that idea and aspiration? How can it get other funders to buy in ?

The framework established through the Finding Voice project was based on the idea of *animating* citizenship while at the same time deploying the power of artistic expression. The students learned a new language, practiced new art forms, and were asked to apply aesthetic skills to evaluate their own life trajectory in the context of a new civic landscape.

Each public agency and individual involved in the Finding Voice nodal system had different measures of success.

- The Tucson Unified School District measured success by standardized test scores.

- The Every Voice in Action Foundation measured success by the level of leadership the youth demonstrated throughout the project.

- The artist and teacher measured success by the improvement in writing and visual literacy skills acquired by the youth.

- The youth participants measured success by the level of critical thinking and emotional reward that they achieved through participating in the project.

- The public has its own definitions of success based on each individual viewer's aesthetic expectations and cultural lenses.

- TPAC measured success by the level of relationship-building and civic interconnectivity fostered by the artist residency. (For example, TPAC became an active co-funder and co-producer with the Every Voice in Action Foundation).

Field Conversations (#3)

As part of the Animating Democracy Arts & Civic Engagement Impact Initiative, the Tucson Pima Arts Council worked with four past Finding Voice students as youth intern researchers to identify how they define the impact of their experiences with the Finding Voice Project.

Joseph Howe, Amani Thal, Sabir Kenya-wani and Marianna Balamani Madden met weekly for four months with the Arts Council in focus groups and virtually through a blog: http://findingvoiceimpact.wordpress.com.

The following is an excerpt from a blog entry by Marianna Balamani Madden:

"For a long time I was ashamed of being Indian, I didn't wear my traditional Indian clothes or have anything do with Indian culture. I wanted to fit in other groups, be an American and dress like one too. Things changed when I came to Catalina Magnet High School. I started to reveal myself and open the doors I had shut for many years. The past three years I made many refugee friends. Each of my refugee friends taught me something of life. I am not embarrassed of being an Indian girl, I feel comfortable in my own skin. I may not know the languages of India, but I am going to keep my heritage alive."

Field Conversations (#4)

Maribel Alvarez: Now, we have been talking about two different models for an arts council to deploy its staff and to work as a catalytic agent: One model partners in a deeper way with art makers and presenters, and there's a model by which, on the same impetus, TPAC goes and creates something out of nothing, like say, a festival.

Roberto Bedoya: But the impulse behind a festival is not about being a catalytic agent; it's about producing a catalytic moment. The theory is that when you get to experience the art, it will change your life. On the other model, as an agent, we are really talking about a job description —when TPAC hires someone to be a connector, a weaver.

Maribel: The difference, as perceived by TPAC's stakeholders, can be huge. One is safe, the other assumes a lot of risk.

Roberto: The difference with the connecting thing is that it is grounded in a very civic frame of understanding your place in the world, of revving you up to be a new citizen, it's a radical, progressive form of acculturation.

Maribel: It worked for Finding Voice, but is that model replicable for TPAC?

Leia: Yes, it is, but keep in mind that not all artists are practiced community cultural development agents, so there's the opportunity to provide tools and resources that may be outside the arts per se.

Dialogue: The Two-Way Mirror

The possibility of seeing things *from the point of view* of program participants or end users of a production makes ethnographic fieldwork an exciting and promising tool for evaluation of arts-based social engagement.

Tapping into the meaning of an art work or artistic intervention from the perspective of those to whom the work is directed is a step in the direction of radically altering the terms of engagement of existing art-delivery paradigms. To be precise, to embrace this model of evaluation is to affirm the belief that people are not empty vessels to be filled up with aesthetic experiences delivered from the outside but rather that people activate and mobilize their own life experiences and resources in the process of creating their own sense of beauty. In other words, the meaning of a work of art cannot be taught. It is discovered and created by the interaction between artist and audience or participants.

In order to work effectively (to yield the outcome of a vernacular, local understanding), an ethnographic approach to evaluation must value *a two-way conversation* between creator and recipient, funder and grantee, artist and audience. In order to access the point of view of the participants, the artist/funder/creator *must ask direct questions of those involved*—a live call-and-respond exchange.

This methodology is so implicit in the collection of qualitative data that its originality and power can be easily taken for granted. It is easy to forget that when someone sees himself in a work of art, the transformation that takes place is not limited to that individual's personal meaning. It also transforms the person who created the work. As is looking into a two-way mirror, the introspection of an engaged participant reflects back on the creator.

Did You Know?

Xerox was one of the first companies to use ethnographic methods in order to develop new products. In 1979, the company hired anthropologist Lucy Suchman to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in various workplaces. She summarized her findings in a film showing office workers struggling to do a copying job on a Xerox machine. After viewing the film, Xerox engineers began to think about designing copy machines differently. Suchman's work led to the large green button we see on most copiers today.

Source: Sanders, Elizabeth. "Ethnography in NPD Research," www.pdma.org/visions

Journal Entry (Leia Maahs, TPAC, 8/10/09)

Working within the existing structure of the Tucson Pima Arts Council's programming has limitations. Using storytelling as the benchmark of evaluation under TPAC's current organizational focus would require us as an agency to make opportunities for grantees to tell us their stories and collect community voices. By this definition TPAC has to walk a fine line; it is not up to us to mandate what outcomes story telling create, or for that matter, an organization's purpose for placing value on "story" or "voice" as a vehicle for the way a project makes civic engagement opportunities to its participants and the public at large.

What TPAC's civic engagement residency projects can accomplish, however, is identify indicators of change on a public level based on the project's capacity to engender outside agencies' support, community engagement in the art works produced, and media response. The value of story is weighted heavily on the opportunity for engagement as opposed to what is being said. For example, the ARTivism website, a pilot evaluation tool for TPAC, was developed for the purpose of making opportunities for the public at large to deepen its relationship with the concepts of social change triggered by the Finding Voice photos and writing and themes of war, health, immigration and home.

The ARTivism website did succeed in establishing a virtual space for engagement and participatory dialogue with youth and exhibit attendees; however, the pilot did not reach beyond the youth and adults who attended the exhibit opening. The Finding Voice students who were not selected to participate with TPAC as youth interns did not engage with the site. In retrospect, this may have been an effort that was premature for the Finding Voice students in Josh and Julie's 2008-2009 class, primarily because they were not invited to design or implement the online virtual installation, but rather it was designed and implemented by TPAC. Had the web-site been designed and integrated into the residency curriculum early in the residency, TPAC may have found more engagement from the students and their parents, neighbors, co-workers, and friends.

This page from Maahs' journal demonstrates both the product and process of an ethnographic inquiry at work. As the ethnographer moves from data collection to analysis, she writes down notes that recount factual information as well as provide an *introspective* reflection on how the process unfolded. The notes contain the beginning of what would eventually become a "thick description"—*detailed and nuanced observations* about what happened alongside an *interpretation* about possible meanings of the facts as observed.

Guidelines for Conducting Fieldwork

A great deal of the interactions that transpire between an artist/evaluator and program participants while collecting qualitative data to help assess social impact have an informal and improvised quality that is hard to codify or prescribe. The fact is that ethnographic approaches mostly yield data that is raw, subjective, and informal. The process by which such data is obtained —called fieldwork by anthropologists—varies as well in relation to the specifics of each situation.

Some ethnographers simply *hang out* with a group for a day or two; others live for months or even years among those whom they want to understand. Nonetheless, by definition an ethnographic approach requires fieldwork of some kind. For an evaluation to be called ethnographic, it requires two essential components: ***being there*** where things are happening; and ***being with*** the people for whom it is happening. While there is no precise set of rules that must be followed, the following are common sense guidelines that can help a research project or evaluation proceed smoothly.

1) Establish rapport and develop a basic sense of being welcomed into the group before bombarding people with questions. Rapport may take some time and it may involve conversations not directly related to the researcher's interests.

2) Identify key narrators able to offer both experiential as well as more holistic and conceptual kinds of information. Gather a variety of information from different sources.

3) Map the field of action: understand who is present and who is absent from the experience; and understand and locate the group or community in its broader context (geographic, cultural, ethnic, occupational, etc.).

4) Keep a journal, diary, or notebook of field notes; be descriptive in your notetaking. Be disciplined and attentive to details and to things unspoken. Include notes about your own feelings and experiences as an observer.

5) Become as involved as possible in the routine and logistics of the experience you are observing. Spend time in informal settings with the participants and have casual conversations; insert yourself without being intrusive or demanding.

6) Record interviews and extended conversations; transcribe key quotations to represent program participants in their own terms. Their stories are your core *data units*. To represent them adequately, you need to record them accurately.

7) Be respectful and sensitive. Step away when appropriate; deepen bonds if it is called for. Do not misrepresent your intentions; assume that others will have expectations of your role, not as a member of the group, but as an outsider.

The requirement for direct, prolonged, on-the-spot observation cannot be avoided or reduced. It is the guts of the ethnographic approach.

Alexander Massey "The Way We Do Things Around Here: The Culture of Ethnography" Ethnography and Education Conference, Oxford University Department of Educational Studies (September 7-8, 1998)
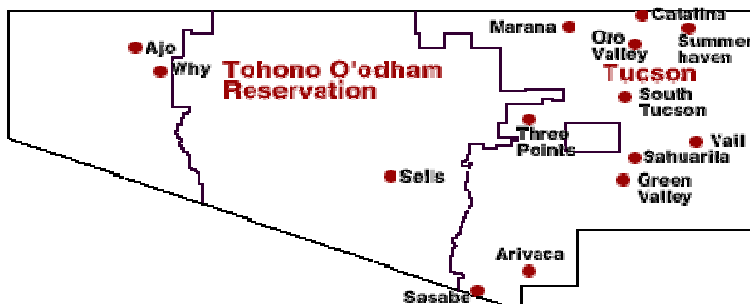
Map of Pima County

Recommendations

Through the Finding Voice project, TPAC has successfully demonstrated the viability of a model of evaluation anchored in the dual practices of story/narration and nodal interconnectedness. TPAC effectively developed and implemented a metric of success centered on the idea that program participants are experts on their own experiences and can articulate and express those points of view when given the opportunity.

The notion of arts-based civic engagement, while certainly not new to artists in the Tucson/Pima area, was thoroughly affirmed by TPAC's collaboration with the artist/teacher team and youth participants of the Finding Voice project. Since the Finding Voice/TPAC pilot collaboration started, TPAC has been able to offer funding support to two additional civic dialogue-oriented art projects through its artist residency program.

In order to continue to build on the assets activated by this approach to art-making and evaluation, it is recommended that TPAC take action in the following areas:

- brand and dedicate specific funds within its Community Arts and Artist Residency programs to support endeavors that involve arts-based civic engagement;

- provide technical assistance and professional development workshops annually to artists and art organizations interested in learning the mechanics and principles of arts-based civic engagement practices and qualitative/ethnographic evaluation tools;

- institutionalize a select number of qualitative measures of evaluation as part of its annual grant reporting requirements from grant recipients; and

- develop a visual instrument to codify its node/connector evaluation scale through either Web-based interactive GIS technology or network analysis.

Special Points of Interest

- Tucson is a mid-sized city in the Southwest United States, 50 miles from the border with Mexico. It is located in Pima County, home to the second largest Native American reservation in the U.S. —Tohono O'odham.

- The area is a mythical site rich in history, landscapes, and human diversity. Ranching, agriculture, military bases and contractors, spas and resorts, Homeland Security law enforcement, and a research university are the leading industries.

- For decades, low rents and open spaces attracted artists to the area. Aggressive housing construction promoted population growth in the last ten years. In 2008, Pima County reached the one million population mark.

- U.S. government agencies favor Tucson as a relocation site for refugee families. Between 2006-2009, a total of 2,204 refugees arrived in Tucson.