Using Theory-Based Approaches to Embed Evaluation within a Small Specialist Performing Arts Institution

How to cite:

© 2022 Jon Rainford; 2022 Vanessa Baptista

Link(s) to article on publisher’s website:
http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1108/978-1-80071-787-920221006

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online’s data policy on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.
Using theory-based approaches to embed evaluation within a small specialist performing arts institution

Jon Rainford, University of Bedfordshire
Vanessa Baptista, Conservatoire for Dance and Drama

Keywords
small specialist performing arts institutions, training, pre-entry widening participation, non-specialist evaluators, embedding evaluation, building capacity, staff buy-in, higher education, policy, change management

Introduction
This volume has already highlighted the moves in higher education policy to increase the rigour of evaluation. An increased focus on robust, theory driven approaches to evaluation presents significant challenges for small organisations where there is not the expertise or budget to employ specialist evaluators. In particular, small specialist performing arts institutions have a number of distinct barriers to overcome. These include: limited budgets, staff capacity, skill levels and long transition pathways subject to a large number of factors beyond the control of the institution. This creates a tension with
widening participation policy which is increasingly demanding on the rigour required for evaluation (OFFA, 2016; Rainford, 2018). Despite these challenges, theory-based approaches to evaluation lend themselves well to developing appropriately focused evaluation in small specialist performing arts providers.

Balancing the benefit of theory-based approaches with the limited expertise that practitioners have in terms of evaluation can mean creating the conditions for this to work effectively requires significant thought. This chapter reflects upon on a hub and spoke model of training and support that was developed within one small specialist performing arts institution, the Conservatoire for Dance and Drama (CDD). This model was designed to support widening participation practitioners based in small schools to develop their own theory of change models and to conduct appropriate local evaluation. In reflecting back upon this process that began in 2017, we will highlight the benefits such an approach can bring alongside the ongoing challenges faced in realising theory-based evaluation within this context. We will argue that whilst it is possible to move to more robust theory-based models of evaluation with non-specialist evaluators, the process can be intensive and requires buy-in from all staff in the process and necessitates the creation of structures to support staff at all stages of the process.

The challenges of outcome evaluation in the arts

Whilst progression to higher education is often encouraged by parents, teachers and other key adults in a young person’s life, progression into the arts is often met with concern or fear. Graduate salaries in the arts are comparatively low (McGettigan, 2017) and government datasets and policy narratives reinforce the ‘poor’ choices of students studying these subjects. More recently, misjudged government campaigns to suggest dancers should ‘retrain in cyber’ (Thomas, 2020) only go to reaffirm stereotypes of the arts not being a positive aspirational trajectory.

Despite the strong preparation pre-entry widening access programmes may give them, many participants will not progress into specialist arts institutions. This leaky pipeline being a result of promising, talented young people being driven towards other, more economically rational career choices. This also does not and should not mean we deem these interventions as failing as there are
much wider benefits that this work offers. The creative industries are still one of the largest growth areas in the economy expanding faster than the economy as a whole (DCMS, 2020). Each of these industries has a need for a wide range of both audiences and staff working within those fields who may not be in traditional on-stage or backstage roles. Having an understanding of the arts is therefore crucial to encourage future administrators, accountants and other professionals to work in the sector. Furthermore, creativity is not bounded in this sector with more creative people working without the creative industries than within them (Higgs et al., 2008). The wider social benefits of arts education should also not be underestimated including its impact on youth obesity and mental wellbeing. Therefore to reduce the impact of these schemes to an outcomes-based measure is to devalue their impact on a much broader spectrum of young people.

Within the sector measures of success for these projects has historically been reduced to progression data. This is something that is unlikely to ever demonstrate the true impact of this work. Therefore, alongside a policy requirement to increase the rigour of evaluation (OFFA, 2016), there was also an institutional desire to build the evidence for the value of such interventions. Whilst previously CDD’s evaluation had been primarily focused on participant numbers or participant enjoyment, it was rightly identified that this was insufficient to provide an evidence base. A more holistic approach that explored the impact of this work on participants and their overall personal and artistic development was needed to evidence the benefits beyond progression and participation metrics.

Institutional Context

Diversity in the arts is an issue of concern within and beyond higher education (O’Brien et al., 2016; Parkinson & Buttrick, 2013). This challenge is mainly one of access, especially when discussing small specialist performing arts institutions. Despite these challenges they offer highly personalised support which results in high retention rates, often exceeding most other higher education providers (HESA, 2021). Coupled with the highly vocational nature of these courses, this training prepares students for careers within related industries. Once students from underrepresented backgrounds gain access, they tend to successfully complete their courses at a comparable rate. Pre-entry widening participation (WP) in the context of specialist arts institutions is intensive, long-term and often plays a pivotal role in progression. It helps build technical skills, understanding of what audition panels look
for, and support through the audition process. However, much of this practice becomes tacit to practitioners with assumptions underpinning this hidden from view. Interventions are based on strategies and programmes of work that have been refined over many years. Therefore, trying to identify exactly what supports successful progression and helps participants realise their ambitions in relation to the artform can be challenging. Beyond this, as Crockford (2018) argues, there are challenges with aligning small scale interventions with macro level outcomes. This applies broadly to any form of widening access project but in the arts there are a number of additional key issues. A benefit of theory-based evaluation is that it can focus on outcomes within appropriate timescapes. Especially when examining the role of interventions in dance with primary aged children, the realisation of a successful outcome in terms of progression to the institution can be 10 or more years away.

The Conservatoire for Dance and Drama (CDD) is one such institution. It comprises six specialist schools delivering world-leading education and vocational training in the performing arts, specifically circus arts, dance (ballet and contemporary), drama, and production arts. Schools are located in London, Bristol and Leeds offering opportunities to widen access across a broader area than would be possible with a single geographic location; however, there are some limitations in respect of small premises and small teams. Access work at CDD faces several challenges: few dedicated staff, limited evaluation capacity and a small population of UK undergraduates. CDD employs a part-time (0.6 FTE) member of staff, whose remit is split between widening participation and equality and diversity, to oversee and coordinate the planning and evaluation of widening participation work across its six member schools. Within the schools, few staff working in widening participation are specialist practitioners and cover additional responsibilities including student support, academic administration, general youth work, and teaching. Capacity for research, monitoring and evaluation within CDD is therefore limited which is at odds with the data-led approach to widening access and the regulatory framework established by the Office for Students (OfS). Furthermore, CDD only admits 250 new UK domiciled undergraduates each year. Half of CDD member schools deliver their courses as a foundation degree followed by a BA top-up year, leaving CDD with approximately 200 genuinely ‘new’ students each year. This creates extremely volatile data shifts when percentage based metrics are used.
There are also specific subject related challenges. Performing arts subjects have been largely stripped from the national curriculum. This means that fewer young people are developing requisite skills within formal schooling and thus development of these skills is largely through pre-entry work in specialist providers or extracurricular provision. These challenges have become particularly heightened since 2019-2020 with exit of the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art and the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art- two large drama schools specialising in acting and production arts. Interventions related to drama and production arts can begin at a much later stage, while dance and circus arts training specifically require several years of consistent training from a young age to develop the necessary skills. To address this, all CDD schools specialising in circus or dance have developed prevocational training programmes for pre-entry learners. These are open to learners as young as 11 and all operate entry by audition only, clearly advantaging learners who already engage in dance. In many cases, the prevocational programmes consist of all day training on Saturdays and additional, shorter sessions throughout the week amounting to on average six to seven hours of training per week. These interventions are time and cost intensive, and create a long, leaky pipeline into dance training at higher education level.

The value for ToC in small specialist performing arts institutions

Work to widen participation, especially that which addresses long term structural issues, is unlikely to have short term impact on enrolment figures and is subject to leakage (Harrison & Waller, 2017). This is especially true for performing arts outreach which often requires long-term, consistent intervention. In certain disciplines this issue is more acute. Ballet for example requires development of technique and conditioning that can take many years. However, many of the participants who start at a suitably young age may not continue all the way to 16 or 18. This can be due to a change of focus in their aspirations or physical limitations, such as injury, creating a leaky pipeline. Evidencing impact is further complicated: governmental policy focuses on higher education applications and admissions to both individual institutions and HE overall. Most performing arts institutions, including the majority of CDD schools, operate direct applications rather than utilising UCAS. These complex and numerous application processes, and the costs attached, lead to both fewer applications and inconsistent datasets. The relatively small pool of applicants for performing arts courses also leads to a
competitive culture between providers that can preclude collaborative work and impact the willingness to share data on applicants.

Tracking the impact of WP activities on learners who progress to other institutions is similarly complex. Services such as the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) are prohibitively expensive for small providers. Additionally, not all learners who engage with performing arts widening participation activities will be able or will want to continue into further training. The competitive nature of admissions into performing arts higher education means that learners may not be successful at audition, may apply multiple times, or apply and study elsewhere. Learners may also opt to study a non-performing arts subject. This makes evaluation on progression metrics challenging. A very large proportion of learners engaged with CDD prevocational training programmes progress onto higher education but a significant minority do not progress onto degree level performing arts training either with CDD schools or elsewhere. Dance and other performing arts training are known to build skills and personal qualities that are conducive to good educational outcomes such as discipline, resilience, and teamwork, as well as benefits to general wellbeing and confidence. Unfortunately, if learners do not progress into their own institutions, specialist performing arts institutions are unable to prove this impact.

A theory of change model can therefore enable small specialist performing arts institutions to evidence that their interventions are having an impact on the attitudes, behaviours and learning. These intermediate outcomes are often more important in evaluating the effectiveness of these programmes than longer-term outcome measures which may be limited by the number of spaces on an HE programmes rather than the individual WP students.

**Giving practitioners the tools to develop a Theory of Change**

Small institutions often lack specialist evaluation capacity. Given the size of CDD and the scope of the work being delivered nationally, this was capacity that needed to be developed internally. Whilst external evaluators could have been commissioned for specific projects, to commission them for day-to-day outreach was not financially viable. Many of the interventions take place on a weekly basis over the course of a year or more. Additionally, the practitioners are often those who observe the
changes in their participants over time and are best placed to drive the evaluation of this. Many of the WP practitioners in the schools are highly experienced teachers and facilitators. This means that they understand what skills and qualities need to be developed to result in a successful transition into higher education level vocational training. This in-depth pedagogical knowledge was complemented by the background of the CDD WP Co-ordinator at the time. His expertise was within more mainstream WP, including the evaluation of this work. He was also a trained social science researcher; therefore, an approach was developed that drew on his expertise. To introduce a new approach, a shared understanding of the value and importance of evaluation needed to be developed.

**Helping them understand the why**

When a theory-based approach was initially discussed within CDD, it was clear that the intermediate objectives of interventions were not always fully explicit. Many interventions may have developed organically and have changed in their objectives over time. It was useful therefore to clearly map out what the intervention was expected to achieve and what change it was anticipated to create. Many years of successful delivery often means that practitioners know their programmes and methods are effective at supporting progression to higher education. The downside of this tacit knowledge, however, can be the lack of critical thought as to why these interventions are effective. Furthermore, there can be a lack of desire to explore if certain interventions are not effective, especially when they form part of 'business as usual'. This meant that before training on the 'how' of evaluation could take place, some time was needed to deepen the understanding of why evaluation was important. This began with making evaluation a primary objective within the 2016-20 Widening Access and Success Strategy (Conservatoire for Dance and Drama, 2016). In doing so, this generated desire from the practitioners to understand how they could operationalise this evaluation effectively and within the constraints of their schools. An evaluation framework based around elements of Kirkpatrick's model (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2007) was developed to support colleagues in evaluating and improving their interventions.
Creating the conditions

In order to support the development of relevant local approaches to evaluation, an initial intensive day’s training on evaluation was provided. During this, practitioner developed a theory of change within a supported workshop environment. This workshop also incorporated an introduction to creative evaluation methods within it. The rationale for this was twofold. Firstly, non-evaluators needed something tangible to make sense of a theory-based approach. Focusing only on the logics behind their causal chains might have helped them better understand the programmes but would leave them none the wiser as to how to practically evaluate their intermediate objectives. Secondly, one of the main objections when asked to do more evaluation was that it was challenging to do in certain environments. It was therefore important to highlight methods that may work within the studio and that would engage students who were undertaking vocational training. Following this initial workshop, individual schools were supported to further develop theories of change for their key projects to help identify measurable intermediate objectives. This hub and spoke model of support and challenge; offering centralised training and resources that could be implemented locally, is one that continues to shape how evaluation is conducted within CDD.

Building evaluation capacity in CDD has revolved around the development of evaluation tools and a system of structured support and mentoring. This hub and spoke model allows the schools to draw on the expertise from the centre. A Widening Access and Participation Project Development and Evaluation Handbook was developed as a single point of reference for both impact evaluation and the development of new outcomes focused interventions. The Handbook emphasised the importance of small steps evaluations (Harrison & Waller, 2017). It also offers various tools including outcomes mapping and theory of change planning templates to support the development robust logic chains.

A key part of ensuring theory-based evaluation is embedded within practice is keeping its visibility high within the institution including at senior management level. Each Autumn, schools submit their annual plan of activity including theory chains developed for each project. Each school meets individually with the Widening Participation and Equality Coordinator to discuss these in greater detail. This process ensures ongoing support for each School as they develop their evaluative skill. Monitoring and evaluation is also a standing item on the Widening Access and Diversity Committee
agenda, maintaining its visibility in the governance structure. As well as reflecting on how activities have been evaluated, colleagues are invited to share evaluation practices. For example, one school has made use of learner journals to monitor progress in their prevocational course. This process also highlighted the need to consider dance-specific vocabulary. Terminology can be alienating making non-traditional participants feel like ‘a fish out of water’ (Reay et al., 2010). Subsequently learner confidence with dance-specific vocabulary has also been evaluated in these journals as an indicator of learning and behavioural change. This forum for sharing practice has been instrumental in developing the evaluative and planning capacity of CDD schools.

**Embedding evaluation in practice**

Each of the schools is at a different stage of their journeys in relation to ToC. We will briefly outline two contrasting approaches. Our first example from Northern Contemporary Dance School is an evidence-led intervention addressing a specific area of underrepresentation: boys in dance. This example focuses on a series of weekly dance workshops that were intended to encourage continued dance training through adolescence. Our second example from Rambert School of Ballet focuses on addressing differential outcomes between students on their prevocational course. Both of these examples demonstrate the hub and spoke approach.

**NSCD- Kick Off Boys Dance Project**

In 2016-2017, to address the underrepresentation of boys from low socio-economic backgrounds in dance training at both their prevocational provisions and HE training more broadly, Northern School of Contemporary Dance (NSCD) developed a project, ‘Kick Off Boys Dance Project’ in partnership with Dance Action Zone Leeds. Recognising that sustained engagement with high quality dance training at pre-HE level is necessary for progression, this project took the form of free weekly classes where boys would work with male dancers. This was intended to provide the boys with role models and to act as a springboard into more serious prevocational training programmes. These classes intended to develop dance skills though sustained intervention that would ultimately lead further engagement with Kick Off, or progression on from the NSCD Saturday School Programme and into Centre for Advanced Training as appropriate. These training routes are NSCD’s most secure progression routes into training. Over the course of the 2017-2018 academic year, Leeds City College and Phoenix Dance Theatre joined the programme. The four partners agreed to three strands of activity: weekly
classes and masterclasses focused on dance technique and skills enhancement fusing contemporary and hip-hop/street styles; opportunities to perform at each partner venues to showcase their work and act as role models for younger boys and; attendance at dance performances with opportunities to work with company artists. Based on these considerations and objectives, NSCD developed their own theory of change for this project supported by CDD's WP co-ordinator.

The short-term goal of this project was to develop enthusiasm for dance amongst the target groups through the presence of role models, and engagement with dance through the provision of boys only classes taught by male tutors. In the medium term, it was hoped that the boys would develop the dance technique, skill and vocabulary that would enable them to progress onto further prevocational training. As the boys developed and performed, it was hoped that they would, in turn, act as role model for younger boys. Finally, in the long term the programme aimed to support the development of the skills, knowledge and confidence necessary for success at audition to dance training at HE.

Rambert School of Ballet and Contemporary Dance - Prevocational Training: Higher and Lower Strands Pilot.

In 2020-2021, Rambert School of Ballet and Contemporary Dance are developing a two strand approach to their prevocational Training Programme to be piloted in September 2021. This programme currently has an excellent progression rate on to full time vocational training at HE. However, learners from underrepresented groups were either unsuccessful at audition on to the prevocational programme or did not progress to higher levels at the same rate as their peers. These
learners often have not had the necessary experience to develop technical understanding, particularly in their ballet technique. To address this, a lower level of prevocational course is being developed. This course will develop technical skills and dance specific vocabulary. Learners will be carefully mentored across the year and encouraged to progress onto the higher level of the prevocational course. Using the CDD Widening Participation Handbook, Rambert School were able to see exactly where the leak in their pipeline was. After identifying this leak, they made use of the Theory of change template in the Handbook to plan their course. This ensured that the programme was outcomes led and that its impact was measurable.

One short-term goal of this project is to develop technical dance skills, specifically pointe. The project will also aim to equip learners with knowledge of dance training specific vocabulary which will be essential to further training. In the medium-term, it was anticipated that this increase of skills and knowledge would translate to progression and success within the ‘higher’ prevocational course. Finally, in the long-term this project anticipates that target learners would develop the skills, knowledge and technique necessary to pursue ballet training at HE level.

The development of both the two case study interventions were reliant upon the extensive in-house staff training and support offered by CDD centrally to staff at its member schools. In both cases, these programmes were developed following the theory of change training. Without the enthusiasm and buy-in from these key members of staff and the support CDD centrally could offer this level of rigour in the evaluation would not have been achieved.
Where do we go from here?

What these case studies have demonstrated is that a theory-based approach to evaluation can be valuable even within small organisations. For CDD specifically, theory-based methods have been shown to help to build capacity and resilience in evaluation. By developing robust logic chains that focus on outcomes and supporting these with clear evaluation frameworks, schools can ensure that knowledge is not held by a single staff member. To further support this culture change, CDD has embedded theory of change and outcomes focused approaches into internal reporting template. This has led to demonstrable, albeit not even, year on year improvement in the rigor of evaluation and implementation of theory of change across CDD's schools. The next challenge for CDD is the continuity of this improvement and its consistency across each member school.

This chapter has illuminated some of the challenges that theory-based evaluation can present to an organisation with limited evaluative capacity. It has also demonstrated that with effective training and support that theory-based approaches have the ability to support continuous improvement in the quality and rigour of evaluation within small organisations. This engagement in the process has required significant commitment of time and resource. This has only been possible due to management level buy-in, which itself has been encouraged by the OfS; requirements for more rapid progress in access. We have also challenged the assumption that experience in evaluation is the determinant of success in developing and implementing theory of change. Whilst having experienced evaluators is the most desirable route for effective evaluation, in organisations with limited funding, this alternative approach can and does work. The lessons are not isolated to higher education. The dual nature of CDD’s schools as arts providers and educational institutions has shown us that these approaches have value to both arts funders and HE regulators. The lessons outlined above therefore have value for both sectors. Over time, this approach can significantly improve the organisations capacity for evaluation far beyond approaches that rely on buying in external evaluation capacity on specific projects.

References


