

Lucy Thurley - External or Internal Evaluation

Lucy Thurley: My name is Lucy. I'm the programme manager at the CPP in Hounslow, West London. We are in the ninth-year funding and are therefore, reasonably well established. Our approach has been to work from the grassroots up to the vision of creating a confident, colourful and creative Hounslow. This is achieved through groups of co-creators, who produce, what is often participation-based activity in their neighbourhoods, a centrally located outdoor arts programme, exhibitions in libraries, and the strategic development of the cultural infrastructure in the borough. I'm going to be talking about our use of internal evaluation processes.

In Hounslow, we collect data at the point of contact with our audiences, and from participants and local decision-makers. By data, I mean, all the information, qualitative and quantitative, about our projects, who attends and who has been involved in planning and producing them. We collect numbers, venue information, personal data, responses to quality questions and comments from audiences, participants, artists and co-creators. Using a standard set of questions means that we have a framework that allows us to compare outcomes across the programme.

Data collection is undertaken by the host staff team who then facilitate evaluation sessions with co-creators. I then analyse the data for monitoring and reporting purposes and produce evaluation reports for the Arts Council England and the Consortium. Each consortium meeting has time dedicated to a discussion topic, which supports our internal reflective processes. In addition,

we write case studies about projects or work that we think has been particularly successful or difficult.

This approach of keeping everything in-house means that anyone within the team can analyse and evaluate their projects with their groups of co-creators. This has built confidence within the team, enabling a thorough understanding of how and why we are collecting information about our projects. In making this decision, we considered time, budget and resourcing. Fundamentally, the decision is based on budget. Our time budgeted for evaluation does not stretch to in-depth work by an external evaluator that could produce both an evaluation report and rigorous analysis. In terms of resourcing, we use Google Drive to securely store data based on standardised feedback forms so that the whole team has access. This is cost-neutral to the programme and no specialist equipment is needed. It does take time for data to be entered, particularly if hardcopy feedback forms are being used and this time could be used to do engagement work.

We have had to be pragmatic about what we can and can't do given all of the demands on staff time, as well as budgetary constraints. We find the process of collecting and analysing data has become part of our everyday habit. We have a reflective practice within the team. Having access to data in this way means that we can collate and review feedback relatively easily.

Our focus at public-facing events is engaging with our audiences, and while feedback forms are a crucial part of this, conversations with community members is paramount. We, therefore, aim to note down observations and conversations in real time as this adds depth to data gathered from feedback forms. Less formal data is also gathered by asking people to comment on post-it notes or asking people to contribute short reflections on video.

Staff team knows that finding an evaluation approach is part of their co-creation planning process. This means agreeing to a framework that will allow people to be honest about what they think of the activity. The biggest advantage of in-house evaluation is also its biggest disadvantage. Our familiarity with the

programme means that we recognise individual inputs and can contextualise them. We don't have to think about the venue or the kind of audience as a participant who attended because there was an activity and we know the places. So when it comes to analysing data, we have a rich contextualised picture to draw upon. We are also able to take a holistic view of the programme using data for an informed decision-making when planning with community groups and developing strategic objectives. We involve community members in reviewing our activity and so being hands-on with the evaluation helps this process.

The disadvantage of this is a difficulty in maintaining objectivity. It is hard to get distance between the successes and challenges of the activity that you are very connected to. Even with intentional zoom-out and reflection time. Participants in our co-creation groups will often feel conflicted about being critical because we have relationships based on mutual trust. In addition, creating evaluation reports takes time, and to do this well, we need focused time. Other operational, strategic, or pastoral demands of the job often take precedence.

My top tips for an in-house evaluation would be to block our calendar time for focused reflection and analysis and to facilitate this process well. Be creative with how you collect qualitative data. Think about the people who will be participating. Ask artists and facilitators to write their observations. They might have spotted something that you may have missed.