

Stephen Welsh - Applying Principles in Context

Stephen Welsh: My name is Steven Welsh and I'm a freelance cultural practitioner. As a cultural practitioner, I work with arts, culture and heritage organisations to develop and deliver more democratic, equitable and inclusive approaches to working with underserved and underrepresented communities. It is one that really emphasises co-creation, and therefore, evaluation plays a vital role in this.

My current approach to evaluation is robust because it rigorously combines qualitative and quantitative research, but it's also open-minded enough to include disagreements and failures. And I always recommend that it is proportionate enough and that it takes into account any potential limitations, such as barriers to participation or even willingness to participate.

As I work a lot with arts, culture and heritage organisations that are seeking to engage more extensively with under-represented groups or even under-represented histories and heritages, it's crucial that the evaluation is as robust and clear as possible, so that everyone involved can feel confident about precisely what is happening, why it's happening and how it will happen.

Over the past couple of years, I've worked with the Imperial War Museum-led War and Conflict subject specialists' network to support staff and network members in order to find a way to deepen their engagement with the histories and legacies of the British Empire and conflict in the 20th and 21st centuries.

This involves reviewing existing evaluation about the purpose, impact governance and membership of the network and previous attempts to engage with British colonialism, and then working with a cross section of staff and network members to determine how

successfully, or otherwise, the network had engaged with British colonialism and what improvement and

associated resources will be needed to deepen engagement. This was quite intensive qualitative evaluation. And then I facilitated a couple of workshops for the wider network and staff to respond to the findings from the initial phase, taking a more quantitative approach and allowing as many staff and members of the network, as was reasonably possible, to contribute.

Making sure the evaluation is robust can be a challenge because, at times, it involves having to engage with disagreements and failure. And this can be a highly emotional process for all those involved in a project. My advice for creating a robust approach to evaluation would be to include a set of co-created joint responsibilities regarding how project partners and participants expect to be treated and how they intend to treat others during the evaluation process.

My current approach to evaluation is connected because I always ensure that I am transparent about how and why decisions about evaluation are made and who is involved. And I always make sure that I have done sufficient prior research, or a deep dive that allows me to be thoroughly aware and grounded in the context of how a project or an organisation is actually operating. And I also make sure that any results or reports are shared as widely as possible. And of course, this is dependent on the consent and agreement of all those who took part in the evaluation. And if there isn't complete consent, I only make certain parts of that evaluation publicly available.

I was working as a consultant in the Association of Independent Museums and Medical Research Center and Trust, and Anti-Racism and Ethical Engagement with the Global Majority Communities Programme called Recollection in 2023. I was a consultant on that project and it was funded. The programme was funded by the Welsh government. I worked with several museums in Wales to develop co-creation action plans that embed anti-racism and prioritise the needs of global majority communities. And this also included, of course, taking a connected approach to evaluation.

Making sure the evaluation is connected can be a challenge because the more openly and widely you share the evaluation process and outcomes, it's highly likely that you'll generate more interest. And this results in more inquiries externally from other projects and organisations that are interested in what you're doing or inspired by what you're doing. But equally, it can potentially generate criticism as well, and you need to be prepared for that. My advice for creating a connected approach to evaluation is to embrace the creative potential of disseminating evaluation outcomes and methods. For instance, thinking about different formats like podcasts or short films. There was an interesting example at Ipswich Museum. Their Power of Stories exhibition produced an evaluation report in the form of a comic, because the exhibition itself had included costumes from the recent Black Panther movies and Marvel Comics. So that was a really interesting way to make the evaluation more easily accessible to different organisations and groups.