

Tina Redford - External or Internal Evaluation

Tina Redford: My name is Tina Redford, and I'm the artistic director of LeftCoast in Blackpool. We are a multidisciplinary arts organisation funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, a number of local partners and Arts Council England, for whom we deliver a Creative People and Places programme, which is otherwise known as CPP. Established ten years ago, our mission is to co-create work with residents, which is socially engaged, socially useful and artistically ambitious.

As one of the very first CPP in the UK in 2013, it was a funding requisite to engage with external evaluators. In the last ten years, this has led to a number of encounters with commercial agencies, universities and freelance individuals. We think that external evaluation provides the objectivity and rigour that we seek to make a credible case for the effectiveness of our practice as a socially engaged arts organisation.

Objectivity is a key driver for us in pursuing external evaluation. It also invites the outside in to help us critique and improve what we do. So, for example, we have an excellent evaluator that analyses our postcode data on a quarterly basis. Primarily, she does this to evidence to the Arts Council that we are engaging with people who don't usually engage with the arts. But in doing so, Helen is able to comment upon our reach in detail and also make suggestions for why we might boost our social media posts so that we can attract new participants. She is also able to calculate a return on investment from the data that our fieldworkers get at festivals. And this is great because it helps us make

a case for the arts to local authorities in their kind of language, which is all about economics and regeneration.

Parts of our decision making to work with external evaluators has to do with their understanding of socially engaged practice. So, our evaluators need to be sympathetic that our work with communities can only move at the pace of trust, and that sometimes we will deliver activities that don't have outcomes such as our supper clubs, so that we can really get to know people without there being an agenda.

Cost and capacity are also factors in our decision making. External evaluation is expensive, and for the relationship between the organisation and evaluator to work, we need to spend time together. We need to work out what methodologies we are going to use in our programme and create bespoke measures of success, such as a story of change.

In my experience, I have found that commissioning external evaluations has helped us to frame and describe our engagement process, which is obviously intuitive towards, but not always explicit, to others. External evaluators have made our tacit practice transferable by helping us to find the language to explain what we do and give us stories and case studies to test the value of what we do. This helps us with funding applications as well as explaining, for want of a better word, what the LeftCoast brand is.

Where the relationship can fall down is often when an evaluator comes with a formulaic or a template process that works for them rather than for us. Another disadvantage of using an external evaluator is that once they become familiar with us, it's probably time for a change. The relationship can slowly start to move into critical friend territory, especially in things like organisational matters as opposed to artistic ones.

I know that I have benefited from an outside eye on my team structure, from an evaluator who really understood what we did and was able to tell me where she felt the additional capacity was needed. However, that is a sign that the

objectivity is starting to soften and it can be a good thing when an evaluator leaves us as they can openly be a fan of our work and are a LeftCoast advocate.

Ultimately, an external evaluator has to be what they are, which is deliberately on the outside of things. I go back to impartiality being the main advantage so that when we get that moving and transformative case study or our practice is being referenced in academic writing, then we know we are doing work of quality and value and we can build on the strength of confidence that this evaluation gives us.

My top tips for commissioning an external evaluator are nothing radical. It's important to see the reports that they've made for the people and, obviously, checking out their references and testimonials is important. But also for us, I would expect that an evaluator anticipates spending a lot of their contracted time actually in the neighbourhoods where we work. Observing what we do and also chatting to our participants because that way I feel that they can really get under the skin of our practice and really understand what we're trying to achieve and how we do it.