

Rising Arts Agency - Applying Principles in Context

Jess Bunyan: I think the main thing about Rising is that we very much are around to cause cultural change. We don't think the people represented in the sector or in society at leadership levels are the right kinds of people. We don't think everyone has equal opportunities at the moment and we see young creatives as the best vehicle for that. And I think there's been a real kind of mindset change that many have had in our directorship. The empathy I don't think is something that a lot of people are talking about, and I think it really links into conversations we're having a lot at the moment around equity. And for me, those are quite similar. You know those speak to each other quite widely. And I think in evaluation, you need both of those things. I think there needs to be a genuine exchange in both- the process they're asking, the people that you're evaluating, what they think of the process of the evaluation, as well as what they think about what's happened or the thing that you're evaluating. I think sharing that agency is incredibly important and being transparent is about the why.

I often think that there's like a level of suspicion in particularly marginalised communities. If you go in and evaluate them, they're like, why? What are you going to do with this? Who are you? You know it feels very authoring in a lot of ways, and I think, actually, everyone is kind of an evaluator even if you don't talk about it like that, and I think that's how you get the most genuine evaluation. And so that empathy of going to everyone in this space is something to teach each other. How do we then have that kind of exchange rather than just getting through these questions, so I can put my report together?

Euella Jackson: I think you know what's quite interesting about the idea of empathy is that particularly in evaluation, I do not think of empathy without action or other than what it is. Sometimes when you just have empathy and you're just like you know, deeply listening to someone, I don't know, there's a line between that kind of performative saviorism. We talk a

Evaluation for arts, culture and heritage: principles and practice

lot about the emotional labour of talking about traumatic events or talking about things related to a lived experience, and we specifically put safeguards in place so that people don't feel like that is happening. But there is a kind of danger of just being like, Oh, tell me about all this stuff that's going on with you, and then I have no good process to hold it or nowhere for it to go or no result of it. So, the why is really important. But, likewise, empathy is really missing. So, it is that balance of like how do you ensure that empathy is a driver for action and not just something that we sit on towards the end goal. We have a really fancy and difficult relationship with evaluation, and you know there's often pressure from funders or external forces to ask quite invasive questions.

We've, you know, done a lot of pushing back with regard to collecting unnecessary amounts of data on people; you know, asking questions that we feel are invasive. I think we have a much broader definition of what counts as evaluation and what counts as valuable. So, you know, it might not be the survey, it might be invasive, you know, when we do an event, the spaces that people go into or the ways in which, you know, people talk about it on social media or whether people come again. I think for us it's really important to ensure that all forms of evaluation are valid.

Being open and curious, you know, open to not only different forms of evaluation or different forms of information, but also asking questions, like we make sure that we create enough space for asking questions. In our community, we love doing things like labs, where we ask a central question around the topic, invite people, pay them to come and just have a chat. And however that comes out, whether it's using Post-its, whether it's the kind of individual journaling that people do, or whether it's the conversations in small groups or a larger group.

Jess Bunyan: And it's at play as well within it, that I think is nice. But, like, ultimately it's explicitly saying lived experience is valuable and I'm going to value it either by creating a space like where you can reflect on what's happened to you as part of this project or come into this thing or I'm going to pay you for that knowledge.

Euella Jackson: One of the ways in which arts and culture organisations traditionally make people feel like outliers is actually not giving them the agency to respond in a way that works for them. It's like you either do this tick box survey. That's it, but if that isn't, then that's a form of feeding back for you and you already feel like an outlier.

Jess Bunyan: We, as part of one of our projects, had a shadow evaluator who is now in the process of becoming main evaluator on a new project they were doing. She is a young woman of colour, an artist, who's been part of our community, since the beginning, I think. But I would love to see more of that. And I do think we've seen only a little bit with producing. How people joining the arts turn their life into something productive. That's what would get me paid, and they kind of figure out how to talk about that. I would love to see something similar with evaluators, for we people are shadowing evaluators, while they're rethinking evaluation more creatively. Obviously, I think young people, diverse, under-represented people could do that the best. But I'm biased. And yeah, I would love to see more of that, like genuine development programmes, encouraged. It should be a leadership role within our sector and it's not given the weight that it deserves. And that's what people don't see as a viable career.