

Title: Virtuous Evaluation: An exploration of reflective learning in the art and culture sector and its implications for strategic management (19 words)

Authors (103 words)

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Abstract (143 words)

This paper generates insights for cultural practitioners and policymakers for next practice in the evaluation of arts and culture. It utilises primary research in the form of an exploratory case study of the renowned UK theatre company Slung Low. The paper profiles the power of reflective learning and considers how it can lead to virtuous evaluation for arts organisations, drawing attention and understanding to the cost-benefit ratio of organisational time and effort invested in evaluating creative projects. It explores the culture surrounding arts evaluation in the UK to consider what can be gained from placing reflective learning at the centre of reporting and planning. The findings highlight the role of such reflective evaluation for organisations' own strategic development and management controls. The paper considers how to transform this into a more virtuous use of time and energy within an increasingly pressurised working environment.

Keywords

Strategic arts management, evaluation, reflection, organisational purpose, management controls

Introduction

Evaluation is often viewed as burdensome for time-stretched arts and cultural organisations (Arts Professional, 2024), with a tendency to focus on demonstration or justification. There may be uncertainty about what funders want to hear and how to find the right language to discuss areas such as failure and innovation (Shiskova, 2017). In this paper, we question the prevailing evaluation paradigm in the UK arts sector, showing the benefits of an evaluation focus aimed towards continuous quality improvement and promoting reflective evaluation approaches that can better serve organisations themselves.

Our study recognises the value of reflection at an organisational level for the purposes of applying critical insights for strategic management and development – a practice that, when it occurs, is too often kept behind closed doors with admissions of failure or flaws kept distant from public reporting (Jancovich and Stevenson, 2022). Many organisations have established evaluation processes, but with the tendency to have multiple funders for one project, each demanding their own evaluation format necessitating bespoke reports with tailored messages, evaluation can consume disproportionate organisational energy, and may offer little tangible return for the organisation or opportunities to use it constructively. Our key interest from an arts management perspective is: *with a small team who are time-poor and already working at or beyond capacity, how can formal evaluation become more useful for the organisation itself?*

Over the course of a year, we explored the lived experience of Slung Low as a case study representing translatable information and transferable insights about the pressures on small, subsidised arts organisations across the creative sector, which do so much to create ambitious cultural experiences with and for their local communities.

This paper first defines key concepts around reflective evaluation before presenting literature relating to evaluation, reflective learning and quality; strategy and control in arts organisations; and organisational identity. We then rationalise our case study and methodological approach, introducing the reflective tools. We frame findings according to key themes, building towards our model of what constitutes virtuous evaluation. We conclude by discussing how through critical reflection, evaluation may be liberated from simply proving worth to instead help organisations improve and develop strategically. Finally, we highlight how evaluation can be most useful to arts organisations and call for broader funding reporting systems to foster evaluation approaches that create benefit for organisations.

Key terms

Reflective learning is understood as a learning cycle defined by stages of: awareness of an experience or incident; reviewing and reflecting on what happened and why; concluding lessons from that experience; and applying what has been learned (Kolb and Fry, 1975). Reflective learning equips practitioners to respond more effectively to new or unexpected situations (Schön, 1983).

Reflective evaluation is our term for applying reflective learning for the purpose of evaluating organisational performance and projects. This is distinct from *virtuous evaluation*: a theoretical concept developed through the course of this paper.

Literature review

The study is positioned within the field of strategic arts management with a focus on evaluation as a management control tool and its implications for reflective learning and quality. As such, it is inspired by literature relating to mainstream management and organisation studies as well as arts management. This literature review foregrounds seminal sectoral initiatives in the UK in relation to this study and situates the contribution of our findings.

Evaluation, reflecting learning and quality

Evaluation has been a conflicted issue in UK cultural policy since the 1980s when post-industrial principles of New Public Management came to the fore, demanding accountability in all areas of public expenditure including arts and culture (O'Connor, 2010). Complex evaluation processes and instruments of account are applied to funded cultural organisations in many countries (Phiddian et al, 2017), perpetuating a culture of impact evaluation that this study considers the 'conventional' approach.

For academics in business and management, evaluation is understood as a central management control tool in the service of organisational development (Hunger and Wheelen, 1996) whereby control is asserted through "monitoring plans as they are implemented and adjusting for any variance as necessary" (Lynch, 2015:742). Conversely, in the public sector evaluation is increasingly regarded as a tool for achieving efficient use of funds and proving usefulness (Shiskova, 2017:8). The evaluation culture predominating in the UK public sector has perpetuated a focus on "monitoring backwards not evaluating forward" constituting "a prove [rather than improve] agenda" in which accountability is prioritised over organisational learning (Jancovich and Stevenson, 2022:5).

What is required for arts evaluation does not always fully align with what a project has achieved (Shiskova, 2017): challenges for subsidised arts organisations include defining success amid myriad artistic, social and financial objectives (Conway and Whitelock, 2007), and constructing compelling

narratives around financial or audience metrics desired by funders which tell only part of the story (Labaronne and Tröndle, 2021).

This study was undertaken in a UK sector environment more open to discussing failure following the seminal 2019-2022 Failspace initiative which interrogated locked-in narratives of success that dominate the evaluation culture for arts funding and cultural policy (Jancovich and Stevenson, 2022). While Failspace explored the nature of reflective evaluation in the sector at a cultural policy level, this study investigates its direct value for a small arts organisation.

In 2023 the UK Centre for Cultural Value (CCV) published a set of evaluation principles for the cultural sector promoting “positive and actionable change over empty justification and advocacy”. CCV’s pursuit of an evaluation model “beneficial” to the needs of organisations and their stakeholders, with “robust” evaluation approaches “geared towards learning” (CCV, 2023:10), highlights potential interest in our conceptualisation of virtuous evaluation.

The study is also rooted in Blanche’s (2014) research highlighting the best system for managing quality as one designed for continuous quality improvement. Any improvement process requires insight on what has or has not worked and what can be better (Blanche, 2014). Learning from failure is therefore as important, if not more, than celebrating successes (van der Graaf et al, 2024). Failspace found “a cultural policy landscape in the UK that is not conducive to honesty, critical reflection or learning from failures” (Jancovich and Stevenson, 2021:12). The sector’s characteristic short-term funding cycles also hinder opportunities for organisations to capture such learning for strategic action (Lynch, 2015).

Strategy and control

Lambert (2020) defines strategy in arts organisations as an evolving process involving learning and reflection, continually influencing decisions on what to do and not do. Strategic planning involves coordinating resources and planning work, nurturing growth and development, responding to the external environment and clarifying the organisation’s purpose internally and externally for stakeholders (Rhine, 2015). It is therefore a key facet of arts management and a vital skill for arts managers to develop (Kershaw, Glow and Goodwin, 2022). Lynch (2015:597) discusses the dilemma of competing demands on strategic purpose, all of which are imperative for organisational development and survival, along with the dynamics and management implications of “steering” (setting policy, dealing with funding, evaluating performance) versus “rowing” (delivering services).

Our research focuses on small arts organisations, which constitute a significant portion of the UK’s arts and culture sector. Chang (2010:217) recognises the “dynamic ecology” of small arts organisations and the valuable contribution they make to the creative industries. Subsidised arts organisations have multiple objectives, motivations and obligations which can occasionally conflict with varying stakeholder perspectives (Conway and Whitelock, 2005). Mission-driven arts organisations and initiatives, or “those which simultaneously pursue artistic and social missions while managing the arising conflicting economic and relational demands” (Carnegie and Drencheva, 2019:178-9), consequently require constant review of strategic approach.

Strategic conversations, acknowledged as an important part of running any enterprise, can be difficult when smaller teams are time-poor. Dedicating time for strategic planning which requires coordinating all team members, taking them away from other projects, is a significant challenge (Bilton, 2017) requiring a pay-off. Even then plans and best intentions may be left unacted due to time constraints (Lambert, 2019).

Organisational values, narratives and identity

Our study resonates with concepts of organisational narrative and identity. Varbanova (2015) equates organisational identity with understanding what the organisation is and what it is not, expressed through

its values, uniqueness, originality, individuality and overall organisational culture and behaviour; this influences what it communicates to the external world. We also consulted identity work theory, spanning humanities, social sciences and business management, which offers useful context for how narrative is authored through “dialogical or inter-relational processes” (Brown, 2022:1220). Identity concepts intersect this study with respect to issues of reflexivity and agency, authenticity, positivity and processes of organising (Brown, 2022).

Case study

Slung Low is an award-winning theatre company founded in 2000, based in an inner-city area of Leeds, UK. The organisation specialises in creating “epic productions in non-theatre spaces, often with large community performance companies at their heart” (Slung Low, n.d.). A core team of three, they believe that access to culture is a fundamental part of a happy life and commit to addressing social inequality; their website proclaims them “uncompromising in our beliefs” (Slung Low, n.d.). Their values include paying all staff the same wage and offering all productions and activities to audiences and participants on a pay-what-you-decide basis. Slung Low receives regular funding as one of Arts Council England's National Portfolio Organisations and has significant regional impact and national profile. Known for being innovative and risk-taking (Perry, 2019), they embrace opportunities not only to develop their practice but to share their learning with the sector and wider world, as exemplified by Lane (2022).

Slung Low was profiled in Failspace’s reporting in 2021/22 having been “repeatedly cited as an example of success in participatory arts” (Jancovich and Stevenson, 2022: 85). This provides a valuable baseline, enabling us to track the significance of this alternative evaluation journey for them. At that time, evaluation represented an external monitoring requirement for Slung Low rather than an explicit learning opportunity. Failspace noted reflection happening at an individual level in the organisation rather than collectively (Jancovich and Stevenson, 2022:98).

This case study offers a relatable example of a small organisation making a significant impact in its local cultural ecology and beyond where, like many organisations whose output is largely project-based, resources are stretched by delivering and developing multiple projects concurrently.

Methodological approach

This longitudinal case study investigates the evolution of reflective evaluation practice over a full year with Slung Low through group interviews undertaken in March 2023 and February 2024, with contact throughout to track activities and developments. Slung Low agreed to use specific reflective tools as an experimental evaluation practice new to them.

The study falls under the category of action research which is suited for capturing “emergent” insights “gradually over multiple cycles” utilising “reflective” introspection on process and outcomes within each cycle (Reason and Bradbury, 2008). We utilised Participatory Action Research as a form of collective inquiry and experimentation grounded in experience “[to] evolve and address questions and issues that are significant for those who participate” (Reason and Bradbury, 2008). Our research structure and methodology assign primacy to the experience and testimony of the research subjects.

Individual case studies enable social phenomena to be studied through intensive analysis to illustrate key themes and aspects, highlight wider issues and happenings, and elicit in-depth data for deep analysis (Gustafsson, 2017). In exploring the lived experience of Slung Low of near-universal arts funding reporting and evaluation requirements, our approach allows for generalisation through “relatability” as a means of finding commonality between contexts (Hammond, 2012). The wider relatability of Slung Low as representative of the socially engaged arts sector further supports our use of this single case study to generate translatable and transferrable insights.

The tools

The study commenced in February 2023 with a full-day workshop for Slung Low at their premises introducing them to concepts of reflective learning along with two reflective evaluation tools developed in the UK for the cultural sector (both publicly available via Creative Scotland's [Is This The Best It Can Be?](#) toolkit and the [Failspace Toolkit](#).)

Though not intentionally designed to be used together, Creative Scotland's [Quality Compass](#) tool and the [Failspace Grid](#) dovetail well in defining where quality exists in participatory engagement and practice. Both hinge on honest reflection and attention to what has or hasn't worked and why, and together they indicate what is needed for forward improvement. Both incorporate more than one way of looking at quality, success and failure, evaluating different stakeholder viewpoints and facets of project design, delivery and impact.

The Compass tool provides a template for constructing a unique project compass tailored for context and purpose, with suggested quality principles and reflective questions about values. It focuses on the ideal that is being aimed for and why, and considers what conditions are needed for these effects to happen. As a living document that can be recalibrated, the Compass creates a visual reminder of requirements for achieving quality. In charting how the ideal might 'look and feel in the room' and 'how will we recognise this happening?' the Compass generates quality-focused indicators for monitoring and evaluating outcomes (Blanche, 2020).

The [Grid tool](#) prompts users to consider outcomes along a spectrum nuancing degrees of success and failure. Work is evaluated against five dimensions: 'Purpose'; 'Process' of design and delivery; modes and levels of 'Participation'; creative 'Practice'; and reputational 'Profile'. Each facet succeeds or fails to its own degree, mapped onto the Grid as 'Outright', 'Precarious' or 'Tolerable' failure or as 'Conflicted', 'Resilient' or 'Outright' success. A project might be acknowledged a tolerable failure with regard to purpose and a precarious failure for participation while being designated an outright success in terms of profile and a conflicted success in terms of process (Failspace, 2022).

Indicators from the Compass can be mapped onto the Grid tool for assessment to stimulate learning from whatever outcome is selected from the spectrum. Insights from the Grid can be returned to the Compass, reinforcing the ideals being aimed for with an enriched understanding of conditions and actions needed to achieve them.

We had Slung Low identify their quality principles and work them onto their own Compass, which they used as a starting point for a new project with a new partner. They utilised the Failspace Grid to reflect upon a recently completed project. The nature of their reflection and the content generated was kept confidential to create a safe context for candid reflection. However, Slung Low have been extremely open in sharing their experiences to support this study.

Findings

We anticipated that Slung Low's focus on quality indicators and their nuanced thinking around failure and success would influence narratives and focus of their evaluation reporting: indeed, Slung Low did report such changes. But significantly, Slung Low also experienced strategic benefits for their organisation, its agency in evaluating outcomes and demonstrating accountability, and its level of control over operational and strategic elements, each with potential to impact the organisation's work, sustainability and wellbeing.

Our findings are framed through three main lenses of efficiency, agency and control as cumulative effects impacting the team's time, resource and effort.

Efficiency

Most arts organisations, especially those consisting of small teams, have limited capacity for undertaking evaluation work, which can create a considerable strain on resources. For Slung Low, pulling resource away from other time-critical tasks to bring the whole team together to experiment with these new tools involved a calculation of cost-benefit.

Strikingly, the most immediate effects reported by Slung Low from engaging with these tools relate to various forms of efficiency. The team immediately achieved enhanced shared understanding and communication between them due to their collective focus on purpose, values and defined quality principles. The tools provoked conversations that would have been different and less detailed had they not addressed specific questions around what constitutes failure, success, core principles and values in their work. The defined language and concepts also improved communication between the team and their delivery partners: they found that what was articulated between themselves could be shared more readily with funders and other stakeholders.

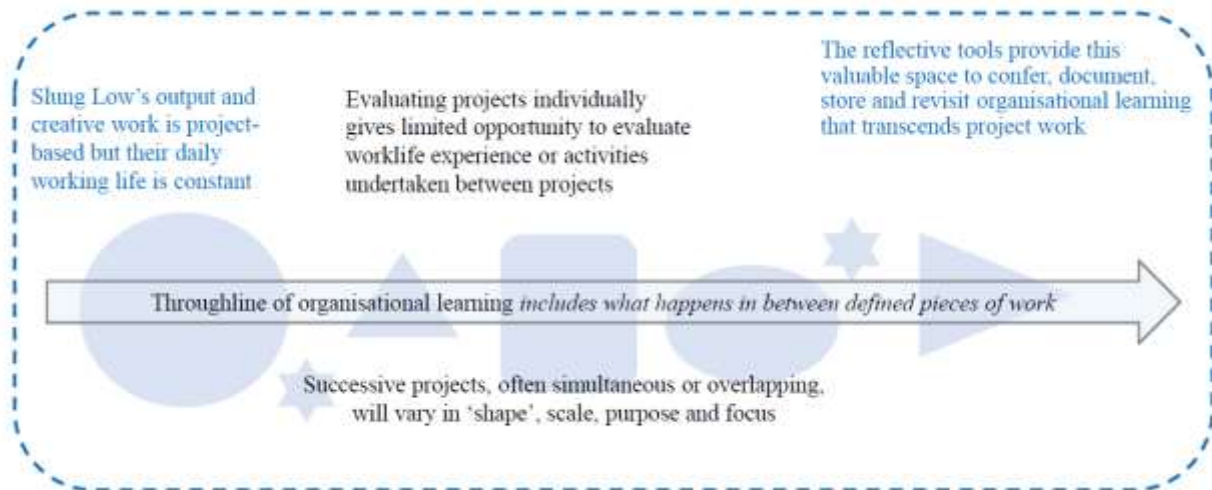
With some excitement, Slung Low reported that working with the tools for the first time immediately generated valuable insights that had eluded them in their previous approaches to evaluation: *“There’s a limit to how much time any of us have... This is four people applying 90 minutes, 2 hours to this [Grid]. There are already 3 or 4 points there, probably more, that didn’t come out in us talking casually.”*

Since that first session, Slung Low came to believe that stepping into a room together with these tools is *“saving time in the long run”* for staying on track. Their reflective conversations are efficient and focused, representing a more effective use of time: *“The next time we do it, not necessarily for this project, we’re going to be better at it, we might notice things in a different way, so already we’re seeing the progression.”* They see a positive benefit of *“four people being in the same room for 2 hours and not doing anything but this”*, recognising that it was *“a failing before when done piecemeal”* with time duplicated *“having to catch others up”*. Fragmented or missing members’ input also yielded less benefit for them. They reported that undertaking evaluation has become *“easier”* as a collegiate team effort, demanding far less *“emotional energy”*.

Above all, Slung Low valued their creation of a vital new space to confer, document and store their thinking, learning and development, which *“lives in us”* as a group. They previously had nowhere to put daily conversations about their working practices. The focused reflection as well as the visual Compass and Grid *“on the wall”* document ideas and comments otherwise lost in ephemera, enabling the team to walk away and come back. The tools created a touchstone to rationalise their work within a wider picture of success, objectives and quality.

Their work now has a space to exist which transcends the lifespan of their projects, opening a valuable throughline (Figure 1) that enables them to actively apply management controls and learning. Like many organisations, Slung Low’s output and creative work is project-based but their working life is constant. Being required to evaluate each funded project individually leaves them limited opportunity to evaluate the quality of their daily life or developments from activities undertaken between projects. Now they say *“It’s giving us a map. Things are easier once there is a map.”*

Figure 1. Throughline of Organisational Learning



Control

The longitudinal 'throughline' focus achieved through Slung Low's experiment of looking back critically at a recent project while designing the next has unlocked new abilities for the organisation to exercise important management controls. Our findings highlight particular value for project monitoring. Their Compass and Grid are documented resources to refer to, check progress and steer by, creating crucial opportunities to spot when something may be "about to go wrong" and take corrective action or troubleshoot "mid-flight". Their reflection process has enabled them to protect core quality features.

Slung Low have also found themselves able to reduce or halt activities confident that they are not degrading core mission or key quality features. With many funders now asking organisations to scale down, do less or be more efficient with dwindling budgets, the dilemma - for small organisations especially - is how to cut back without undermining outcomes? Having their Compass to turn back to and knowing where their quality resides has enabled Slung Low to prioritise key conditions and keep their values sacrosanct while making changes, equipping the organisation to be more versatile. Controls that support any organisation in sustaining quality, averting problems and preventing disruption to projects are of obvious strategic advantage. Slung Low are moving forward with quality at the heart of "the next phase of how we operate".

Agency

All of this has empowered Slung Low to make and communicate changes from "a position of strength", representing increased agency. They are accessing a form of applied organisational learning they term "smarter operating", being more informed about what represents quality and how things could fail in their work. As well as facilitating success in their practice, their evaluation narrative is enriched and made more robust by a greater understanding of what impacts are achievable and the conditions required for success. This has helped them frame deliverable, detectable metrics that in turn strengthen their evaluation results, evidence and reporting. Their "granular level of understanding is much greater."

The organisation is empowered by control over defining their values and what metrics are most meaningful for their work, assuming greater agency over how, why and what they evaluate: "What this allows you to do is set the agenda before you start." Further evidence of increased agency is being able to validate and communicate to themselves and others what their own success looks like, through different lenses and project facets, lending more weight to the outcomes they can demonstrate and evidence. Being able to talk definitively about what represents success creates greater legitimacy with the funder: "It increases the confidence of communication... because you know exactly where you want to be." Slung

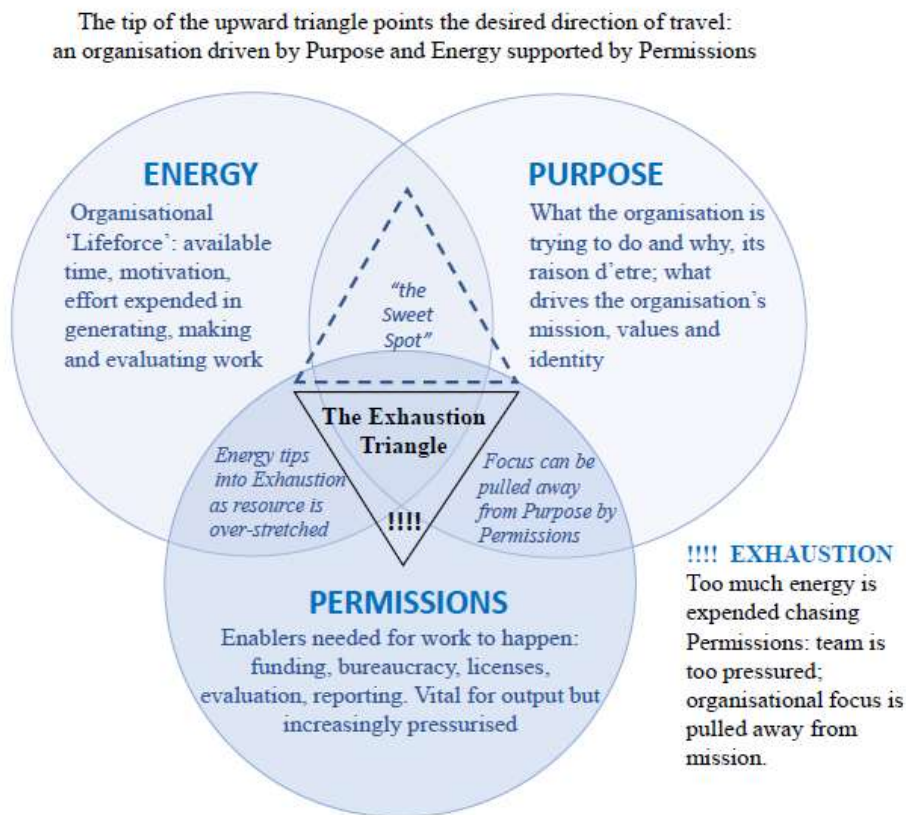
Low report that their evolving narrative is “*more robust*” in how it comes across to funders, being able to qualify successes even in apparent ‘failures’ on certain metrics and say to funders ‘look: this is what has been learned’. “*If we’re gonna do evaluation, [we] want it to be really good ...and then share it with our funders to say, ‘this is our thinking, would you like to continue to support us?’ That’s the proper way of doing this.*” Validation is further reinforced by being able to show what they are doing as part of a documented strategic process geared towards continuous improvement.

The significance of these effects for organisational practice goes beyond external narratives of accountability, creating important agency for organisations to hold themselves internally accountable for values and wellbeing. The ways in which this can happen may be examined through the metaphor of an “*Exhaustion Triangle*” which emerged from discussion with Slung Low.

The Exhaustion Triangle

Slung Low explained there are three forces they must constantly keep in balance: their “*purpose*” (mission), their “*energy*” (or organisational life-force) and the “*permissions*” that enable their work to happen (primarily funding). They described these forces bordering an “*Exhaustion Triangle*” they try to stay clear of. Figure 2 depicts our theorisation of these forces which arguably exemplify the pressures faced by small arts organisations in general. This concept provides useful context for how regaining control, agency and efficiency as described above might impact an organisation’s ability to sustain itself and navigate strategically.

Figure 2. Conceptualising the “Exhaustion Triangle”



Slung Low’s term “*permissions*” concerns what they need for their work to happen: funding; licenses; production of impact evaluations and reports. Permissions are vital for the organisation’s output and

sustainability but are pressurised by statutory regulations and competition for funding, often beyond the organisation's direct control. Although they enable the organisation to do its work, the experienced reality is that managing permissions often drains energy away from other (purposeful) activity. Evaluation in its most mission-detached form was characterised by Slung Low as a heavy permissions task.

Slung Low's experience of time efficiencies created by reflective evaluation, along with less emotional energy as a team effort, is significant with respect to the energy which is vital for creative drive and external engagement. If pressured too much it may tip into "exhaustion". Slung Low commented "we know what the possibilities are and that's a finite amount...[what] we're really talking about in that Triangle is efficiency". They now see the possibility that "we might get some time back", freeing headspace and energy for creativity or mission-focused activity, which is also significant. "Evaluation can now become something that we use to generate energy, to be clearer about mission. ... Instead of it being closer to the exhaustion and permissions side of the triangle, it's closer to the purpose, so it becomes a positive thing that generates energy and clarity rather than [a burdensome task]."

Slung Low observed that their "purpose" is often pulled away to deal with urgent tasks, particularly "chasing permissions". Through heightened clarity of purpose, they have been emboldened to pare back activities retained through habit in favour of what they most value; another constructive development with respect to averting exhaustion.

Exhaustion occurs when too much energy is expended, when team resource is overstretched for long unbroken periods. Drifting into the Exhaustion Triangle may be inevitable in the heat of a project but is not sustainable. For Slung Low, constantly securing permissions is a way of life. However, exploring what outcomes on their Failspace Grid would constitute conflicted success or tolerable failure led Slung Low to reflect that their artistic product could be "the most amazing show" but if the pressures of delivering it resulted in stress (euphemised as any team member 'crying in a cupboard') it wouldn't be the success for them that was perceived externally. "We'd go 'well really, no, it's just not [a success]'. We have to allow for that [and] talk about values, talk about what's right and wrong". In this context, agency lies in taking more control over how they expend the resource of their time, energy, emotional labour and commitment, and their authority to qualify these as valid measures of success or failure. Being equipped to rationalise and set boundaries on what is reasonable for them to accept in relation to effort represents empowerment.

Slung Low envisage a "sweet spot" in the Exhaustion Triangle where, by not repeating mistakes and creating time and energy efficiencies, they can move away from exhaustion while maximising purpose and permissions. They speculated that the reflective evaluation approach can "turn what is basically a drain on resource, and a thing [we might try] to avoid, into a potential positive if we do it properly."

It can be argued that the above opens up transformational opportunities for small arts organisations in terms of: time, resource and effort; agency and empowerment; ability to exert a range of management controls that may have been out of reach before; and the capacity to apply learning for continuous improvement. Consequently, these findings lead us to present our concept of virtuous evaluation as an activity that transcends burden by bringing concrete strategic benefits for the organisation.

Towards a concept of 'Virtuous' Evaluation

Our case study shows that for Slung Low some of the burden of their evaluation reporting is being transformed into something of virtue by bringing strategic benefits for them. They remarked variously through the interviews: "If we get this evaluation right and we spend less time 'demonstrating', it will be virtuous time...We might actually learn from our evaluation; we can tell a compelling story, inspire funders to get behind us."; "It is the same task but will make the task more positive"; and "[we] haven't maybe spent any less time doing it, but the time is virtuous."

The reflective evaluation approach and self-correcting along the throughline of their working practice feeds into the life force of the organisation, yielding greater returns than a report on an individual project for a single funder. The effort expended on evaluating and reporting is no longer single-use, but something that adds to organisational purpose, direction and agency.

These two tools have stimulated more holistic thinking for Slung Low and created learning they can carry more tangibly across projects and embed in a practical way for continuous quality improvement. Evaluation work has therefore become something that works for their future direction, beyond simply a reporting requirement. The effort and output are virtuous in that they have meaning and usefulness for the organisation, which in turn “*generate energy*”. Slung Low are continuing to work with their Compass for projects and for broader strategic development. They called this their “*evolution*”.

Virtuous evaluation may lie in the difference between a management control imposed externally by a funding process and a management control utilised internally as part of an organisation's strategic journey. Placing mission, vision and values at the heart of organisational planning is after all fundamental to strategic management theory (Varbanova, 2013). The Exhaustion Triangle metaphor reinforces the benefits for the lived experience of the organisation.

Conclusion

“Evaluation without corrective, appropriate action is not control” writes (Donaldson, 1998:304). Likewise for Pearce and Robinson (2007:391) strategic control involves “tracking a strategy as it is being implemented, detecting problems or changes in underlying premises, and making necessary adjustments.” This study reveals that through use of the Quality Compass and Failspace Grid specifically, Slung Low are implementing these tenets in their most strategic form by building from their reflective learning to create efficiencies, take corrective action, make improvements and exert healthy management controls on their resources. Their use of their reflective space for strategic planning enables learning in the service of their own organisational evolution, continuous quality improvement and optimised strategic decision-making.

The prevailing “prove” agenda of the arts funding sector is recognised as limiting and disempowering (Jancovich and Stevenson, 2022:5), forcing evaluation into a compartment separate from reflection or learning. It is recognised that funding contracts require accountability: of course, funders need to confirm outputs and outcomes. However, to be accountable may be understood simply “to give reasons and explanations of what ones does” (Zan, 2006:6), which Slung Low report being more empowered to do through this new approach.

Conversely, a funding agenda aimed to “improve” coincides with our concept of virtuous evaluation (associated with quality, strategic prowess and robust narratives conveying nuance). This case study shows the benefits for quality of an evaluation focus capturing learning for improvement. Furthermore, for the small arts organisations exemplified by Slung Low, their application of an evaluation process suiting the “improve” model has simultaneously unlocked a wide range of strategic and operational benefits that clearly adhere to a principle of “beneficial” evaluation (CCV, 2023). All of this encourages further attention to the concept of virtuous evaluation offered here.

Our findings strongly support an argument for evaluation structures at a systemic level to be calibrated towards the “improve” model for the organisational benefits of virtuous evaluation to be supported. This requires leadership by funders at that level (van der Graaf et al 2024; Jancovich and Stevenson, 2022) to create a safe environment for authentic narratives (Brown 2022) and legitimise operationalised learning from reflection (CCV, 2023; Blanche, 2014).

Furthermore, at an operational level this study advocates revitalising key principles of strategic management theory in evaluation approaches adopted by organisations in the sector, to optimise evaluation as a vital monitoring and management control tool in support of long-term planning, ownership of learning and continuous quality improvement. The results of Slung Low's experiment support wider use of the two tools applied in this study.

In the meantime evaluation may continue to be structured externally for demonstration and justification (Shiskova, 2017; CCV, 2023), but for now Slung Low attach significant strategic value to the continued use of these particular reflective evaluation tools for their own internal development, and find operating from this place of clarity and commitment to purpose "*a much more fulfilling way to be*".

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