APPROACH TO EVALUATION AT OVAL HOUSE THEATRE

By Jim Coe
Project background

‘We Are London’ is a youth-led arts project run by Oval House and funded by The Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund (‘the Fund’). Its aim is to bridge the gap between young refugees and people seeking asylum and young Londoners from more established communities. Young people use drama, dance, music, film making and photography to make new work that explores their ideas and concerns.

The aims of the project are to:

1. Offer young people from new and more established communities in south London the opportunity to have a voice through the arts and develop new creative skills by working alongside professional artists/facilitators.
2. Support young people to build respect and understanding across cultural boundaries though working in a supportive environment and towards a common purpose.
3. Offer young people opportunities to develop leadership skills and take on leadership roles on the project and have an influence on project content and structure.
4. Disseminate learning to project partners and the wider art and community sector.

These notes also draw on experiences from an evaluation of a previous project, also part-funded by the Fund, ‘Living Here’. This project explored how participatory arts can be an effective tool for supporting the social and educational inclusion of young refugees and people seeking asylum.

Approaches to evaluation

Youth led

The evaluation is youth-led because Oval House is committed to exploring how young people can be right at the heart of project development, including through taking a significant role in evaluating the project.

Having young people at the core of how the project is developed and managed brings two interlinking benefits.

1. It provides opportunities for young people’s own development (see Evaluation as a vehicle for promoting young people’s development).
2. It encourages more open and honest evaluation by the project participants, meaning that lessons can be learnt and this and future projects can be organised in ways that best meet the needs of those with whom Oval House is working.

Integrated within the project

The project is founded on the principle that evaluation and reflection should dovetail with project delivery, so that evaluation is not seen as something separate, or an afterthought, but a core element of the project cycle.

The project also utilises participatory arts methodology, using the tools that the young people are most familiar with to maximise buy-in and minimise alienation.

1 The report is available at http://www.ovalhouse.com/crn/creative_youth/publications.php
This means:

1. **Involving young people right from the beginning...**
   
   ...so that evaluation is part of the ongoing process and as a way for the project team to indicate to young people that they are stakeholders and partners, not just recipients, and they can develop ‘into’ their role.

2. **Reviewing progress on an ongoing basis, not just at the end...**
   
   ...so that lessons learnt by the team including young people can affect the project’s development. They see that their input has an impact.

3. **Being prepared to adapt and change plans as a result of young people’s inputs.**
   
   ...Although the overall aims of the project may not change, the plans need to be flexible to allow the group to establish the pace of development. As Oval House identified:

   ‘In the ‘We Are London’ project we had expected to introduce accreditation and leadership training days earlier in the year but discovered that the young people were not ready. It would have been a mistake to push this. Because we waited, the young people will gain so much more from the opportunity and we are much better equipped to offer the support.’

**Evaluation as a vehicle for promoting young people’s development**

One key theme of Oval House’s approach is to develop the leadership skills of the young people, recognising that there are different levels of leadership, and to support young people to take on the role that they are ready for.

As part of this, evaluation has itself operated as a route to developing leadership capabilities. This was achieved in the ‘Living Here’ project by training a team of student peer researchers to interview past and present attendees about their perceptions of the project and reviewing the responses. Training covered interviewing techniques, listening skills, being objective, confidentiality and how to encourage interviewees to be specific rather than general.

The peer researchers found the interviewing harder than they thought it would be but all thought it a useful exercise that should be repeated:

‘When I was a peer researcher at Oval House I was interviewing people to find out their ideas about the project. I learnt how to keep a confidence and how to be really professional. It was like a serious job. I learnt to interview people, to make them feel comfortable to talk to me. I’m going to put it on my CV because I think it will help me to get a job.’

They also reported that many young people were surprised but pleased to be asked their views.

Currently the team have ten young leaders in training with the ‘We Are London’ project, who are currently collaborating with MA students at Goldsmiths College to explore participatory evaluation.
Building a picture by drawing on different perspectives

One effective approach to evaluation is to gather and then compare a range of perspectives.

In reviewing the ‘Living Here’ project, Oval House drew on external comment to help corroborate and validate the testimony of the young people. This way credible evidence can be built up on how the project has achieved each aim. So for example, responses include:

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<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Quotation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Young peoples’ comments</td>
<td>My first time it was the drama about the girl who came to the school from another country – she thought it was the same school, like in her country, but it was different. She couldn’t speak because she was scared. She had never seen these kinds of people maybe … I love that drama!</td>
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<tr>
<td>Project tutors’ comments</td>
<td>Drama is a safe way to explore what is happening in their lives. The fiction gives it some distance and safety so they can be objective.</td>
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<td>Teachers’ comments</td>
<td>It really helps them to work together as a group. When they first come they don’t know each other or what to expect. The students are really developing and I can see they are bonding together. Teacher, Lilian Baylis School</td>
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Summary of quotations in support of the aim - as part of ‘Living Here’ - to ‘provide non-threatening arts processes to enable them to make sense of their new circumstances’.

In this way, different views on the project are put in context and also reinforced by other perspectives.

Building on this approach further, Oval House uses a range of additional ways of gathering information, including:

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<th>Ways of gathering information</th>
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<td>Observation</td>
<td>Facilitators, artists and partners observe the group and reflect on these observations.</td>
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<td>One-to-one mentoring</td>
<td>One-to-one sessions where the young people can voice opinions and reflect with a mentor as a way of continuous support.</td>
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<td>Diaries and development plans</td>
<td>Participants keep a diary of sessions, including what went well what was challenging, allowing young people to reflect and put together a body of evidence of their contributions and to track their own development throughout the project.</td>
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<td>Peer reflection</td>
<td>Time for the group to come together without the involvement of the project tutors, where the group can reflect on the project and its development.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Session evaluation</td>
<td>Time after each session to reflect and discuss how the session went and identify any particular successes and concerns.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tutor feedback after workshops</td>
<td>Written feedback from tutors after sessions outlining what was achieved, what the barriers were, recommendations, future support needs etc.</td>
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To supplement these methods, Oval House has also drawn on academic theory assessing the factors that promote resilience by equipping young people to overcome adversity. Relevant factors include, for example (a) exposure to situations that provide opportunities for problem solving; (b) the capacity to reframe adversities; (c) extra-curricular activities that promote the learning of competencies and emotional maturity. Utilising this analysis, Oval House has set out how these factors are bolstered through the young people’s participation in their projects.

Using frameworks that encapsulate what the project is about

Oval House has developed a set of ‘self confidence indicators’ identifying a range of social and communication skills that tutors expect to help engender through the project. These are:

1. Making eye contact
2. Interacting with new peers
3. Taking risks
4. Managing differences of opinion
5. Encouraging and supporting others
6. Open body language
7. Willingness to take part/contribute
8. Interacting with adults
9. Listening/respecting the ideas of others
10. Presenting a reasoned argument
11. Expressing an opinion/idea
12. Asking questions

For each skill, signs of increasing confidence are assessed using a scale of 1 to 5. For example, the ‘making eye contact’ scale is as follows:

1. Makes little or no eye contact
2. Makes occasional eye contact when engaged by an adult
3. Makes spontaneous eye contact some of the time
4. Makes good spontaneous eye contact most of the time
5. Makes excellent eye contact in all communication

Tutors monitor young people monthly to review progress and – while they cannot claim the work done in the group definitively helps the student develop these skills – they can show that young people are demonstrating an increasing competency with many of the skills during the lifetime of the group. Tutors have also found that this framework helps to sharpen their focus on building in appropriate opportunities for individual young people.

Oval House also uses recognised frameworks such as Every Child Matters, for example setting out how the ‘Living Here’ project has helped achieve the Every Child Matters outcomes and aims.

Using participative techniques

Oval House deploys creative approaches to evaluation that are integrated into project delivery, using participating theatre approaches as a key tool. This helps ensure that the evaluation methodology is closely linked with the processes that young people are familiar with. One such tool is Forum Theatre, where a situation or problem is acted out and then, prompted by suggestions from members of the audience, alternative ways of developing the situation are enacted with audience members stepping in and replacing the protagonist, in order to achieve a different end.

For example, a group of young singing leaders created a dramatic scene to demonstrate the challenges they had met working with younger children on the project. The group went through a process re-imagining and re-playing the moments of dilemma they had experienced to test out different strategies and their consequences. They then compared their newly-imagined approaches with a set of ethical values they had chosen for themselves (honesty, responsibility, love, equality and justice).

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2 These are some of the factors that support resilience, as identified in Newman T & Blackburn S (2002): ‘Transitions in the Lives of Children & Young People: Resilience Factors’. Interchange No 78. Scottish Executive Education Department.
This process was extremely powerful as it enabled a range of narratives to be explored while de-personalising the issue by using fiction. It also empowered the young leaders to take a role in creating and implementing solutions.

Simple visual tools can be designed to collect and present information in ways that are relatively easy to understand and use. One method is the ‘evaluation star’ (see below). Young people in Oval House projects have used this tool to report how they feel about singing; it can of course be adapted to cover any questions of interest. Participants mark on each line the extent to which they agree with each statement. Repeating the exercise can show the developments that have occurred during the lifetime of a project.

The young people mark a cross on the line, where they think they are in relation to the statement and connect the crosses to make a shape. Later in the project, they add new crosses at different points on the line, and the shape changes. The changes they record can be a starting point for a conversation with the young people about how the project meets their needs.

**Evaluation star**

- I enjoy singing
- I feel confident singing in a group
- I feel okay about doing a performance
- I know songs in different languages
- I am good at listening to people
- I want to do more singing
- I feel confident singing on my own
- I am good at getting on with people

**Evaluation star**