Culture and Local Governance
Culture et gouvernance locale

Intro to special issue
How We Work With/in Culture Now: Reimagining Impact Assessment and Governance
Introduction au numéro spécial
Comment nous travaillons avec/dans la culture aujourd'hui

Mary Elizabeth Luka, Robin Nelson, Shawn Newman and Robin Sokoloski

See table of contents

Explore this journal

Cite this document

Intro to special issue

How We Work With/in Culture Now: Reimagining Impact Assessment and Governance

Over the last several decades, policymakers, funders, artists, and arts organizations alike have attempted to find ways to assess the impact of their investments in and support of the arts (e.g., Banks 2010; Dempwolf et al 2014; Essig 2018). Moreover, scholars and culture sector leaders have often noted that the sector tends to depend on a fairly narrow brand of research and evaluation practices to inform future directions. These approaches tend to be reliant on fundraising or marketing imperatives such as achieving a monetary goal for a revenue stream, or filling seats in performance halls, or to address the operational use of funding such as how many activities were conducted, and how many people were involved so that grant recipients (for example) might better account for public funds. But there is more to assessing impact than to report on outputs or aggregate numbers (e.g., Luka 2022). In 2020, while working with several policymakers and funders while having identified several scholars working on these kinds of questions including finding ways to ameliorate the dearth of qualitative impact assessment frameworks, Mass Culture decided to facilitate and develop a renewed level of collaboration across the arts community, arts funders, and academia to advance arts impact research in Canada. This initiative has resulted not just in the production of robust qualitative impact assessment frameworks but also a community of practice (e.g., Markham 2018; Wenger et al. 2002) that bridges between varied governance structures and practices to support cross-sectoral efforts to identify what the culture sector brings to society today.

In 2020, Mass Culture convened a series of discussions that resulted in funding and participation commitments from several funder organizations (including Canada Council for the Arts, the Culture Statistics Working Group: Federal-Provincial-Territorial Culture and Heritage Table, Ontario Trillium Foundation, and the Toronto Arts Foundation) to support what became the *Research in Residence: Arts' Civic Impact initiative* (RinR) in 2021-22.[i] With the additional support of Mitacs[ii] funding, the project supported six graduate students as interns for RinR, followed by a successful request for 2022-23 for a Mitacs Postdoctoral Fellow to conduct further related research in cultural governance and creative labour. The RinR project's governance structure is illustrated below in Figure 1, including the six universities, six interns, and one postdoctoral fellow that participated (Carleton, Dalhousie, McGill, Toronto, and Winnipeg, and Emily Carr University of Art + Design's Aboriginal Gathering Place), as well as more than a dozen arts organizations. The researchers and their specific arts' civic impact area of focus were: Sydney Pickering, Indigenous Cultural Knowledge (Emily Carr); Emma Bugg, Climate and Sustainability (Dalhousie); Aaron Richmond, Health and Wellbeing (McGill); Shanice Bernicky, Diversity and Inclusion (Carleton); Audree Espada and Missy LeBlanc, Diversity and Inclusion (Winnipeg), and Laurence Deroin Dubuc, Creative Labour and Sustainability (Toronto). The latter Mitacs Postdoctoral Fellowship was held at University of Toronto Scarborough (UTSC), and hosted by Mass Culture, and their work appears in this special issue (Dubuc 2023).

Figure 1: Governance structure for Research in Residence, (c) Sokoloski & Luka

These collective resources were further augmented in 2022-23 by the activation of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)-funded project, Expanding Impact: Activating Arts and Culture Today, which convened several roundtables across the country. These included participation in the Arts Service Organizations: Positioning a Future Forward conference[iii] in Toronto in January 2023, and the Repositioning Arts Research arts councils' National Researchers' gathering in Ottawa in April 2023, both organized by Mass Culture, as well as roundtables in Edmonton, Whitehorse, Charlottetown, and Montreal.

In the summer of 2021, RinR was just starting. Robin Sokoloski (Mass Culture) and Mary Elizabeth Luka (University of Toronto) co-led a ten-month methods and research training intensive for the six graduate students involved as interns in the Mitacs-funded Arts' Civic Impact Research-in-Residence project, which generated three impact assessment frameworks for and with the culture sector (see the Research in Residence website). The six trainees came from different disciplines and were at different stages of their academic careers. To achieve group cohesion, in July 2021, Luka and Sokoloski met weekly (and virtually) with the students to develop a series of shared values, practices, and a co-created teaching structure. Luka led participants through a series of potential research methods, using readings, discussions, and reflections while Sokolsoki offered insights into how some (though not many) of these kinds of approaches were manifest in the field. In late August, Sokoloski and Luka met for four consecutive days online to train them how to prepare their Research Ethics Board submissions. Over the following eight months, both, again, met monthly with the students, initially to review progress on methods

development and then to bring in guest speakers and troubleshoot challenges in the execution of their research projects.

In May 2022, Sokoloski and Luka brought everyone together in-person for the first time—including participants in the broader project and other experts of interest to the students—to discuss their projects' preliminary outcomes and launch the knowledge-sharing roundtables across the country. Through these Mitacs internships and the subsequent roundtables, the culture sector and the academy were both brought together to train new researchers who can deepen and enrich how the sector goes about conducting research, and to build respectful, reciprocal, and inclusive collaborations. The impact of this work was also felt at Mitacs. Experiential education and applied research are challenging to integrate into graduate education in the social sciences and humanities, evident in the low participation of such students in Mitacs-funded internships: as of 2023, 81% of completed Mitacs internships have been in STEM disciplines, compared to only 19% in the social sciences and humanities (see mitacs.ca/en/projects). Ensuring that the students being trained in postsecondary institutions are prepared for work in the culture sector today thus represents an important innovation.

The Research in Residence: Arts' Civic Impact worked with CreativePEI, Culture Days, Art Gallery of Winnipeg, Montréal arts interculturels, Danse-Cité, Boca del Lupo, Grunt Gallery, Museum of Anthropology, and Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation to implement on-the-ground research, identify indicators, and collect, analyze and interpret data. Publicly-available sector-focused outputs include the Methods Report from the first five projects,[iv] and the three open access frameworks to date. Emma Bugg developed the participatory Living Climate Impact Framework for the Arts, which has been distributed at several events and environments not just in Prince Edward Island where it was developed, but also nationally through the arts council researchers meeting in Ottawa noted earlier.[v] Shanice Bernicky continues to work on the Spiralling Outward for Equity in the Arts framework[vi] as she completes her doctoral studies, and Aaron Richmond completed the first phase of the Access in Counterpoint framework,[vii] which he continues to work on as a postdoctoral fellow at Concordia University.

It is worth noting that for both *part one* and *part two* of this special issue, it was elected to incorporate a peer-review process that involved feedback from scholarly and sector experts. This reflects the spirit of the RinR collaboration, but also provides a check-and-balance for articulating this research in plain language across the academy and the culture sector. This was not easy to accomplish. Tenured scholars know that part of their day-to-day responsibilities include peer reviews, for which they receive no additional compensation for their contributions since these often take place during regular workdays. Many sector experts hold precarious employment or are underemployed or underpaid, and therefore are normally compensated for peer assessment contributions of this nature (e.g., for arts councils or other assessment processes). There are ethical and representation implications for both approaches in this case. While RinR, like many participatory or community-engaged scholarly research projects, used a schedule of payments for participants to acknowledge just such precarity during the research phase, most scholarly journals do not pay people for their contributions. So, the co-editors ended up asking culture sector experts in less-precarious positions to see if they would be able to undertake this task as part of their regular workday. Where that was not possible, someone else who had capacity was asked. This means

that the perspective of sector experts in more precarious or underemployed positions (which is most of them) is less likely to have been represented. Nonetheless, it was impressive to see how carefully people from both fields reviewed the materials for this issue and all authors and co-editors are grateful for their contributions.

In this part one of the special issues, some of the key methods and findings were shared by not just RinR, but also from related research that contributes to the larger issues of how to assess the impact of arts and culture in Canada. Laurence Deroin Dubuc delineates important milestones and principles embedded in the Mass Culture governance structure in her article, connecting the organization and its supporters with principles of ethical, action-oriented participatory research. Emma Bugg reports on the development of the RinR Living Climate Impact Framework for the Arts, writing with co-authors Tarah Wright and Melanie Zurba about responding to the need to undertake "climate-engaged cultural work… around Sustainability and the Arts (SATA)." Together, they begin their article by explaining how individual arts administrators may be committed to SATA activities and approaches despite the fact it has been more difficult for resource-strapped arts organizations to engage meaningfully in the movement. Furthermore, they reveal how they developed a series of flexible ways forward on the east coast of Canada. Hayley Janes, Adrian Berry, Ely Lyonblum, Laura Risk, and Nasim Niknafs discuss the arts-based methods used in their research project, *Sustainable pARTnerships: Collaboration and Reciprocity in Creative Cities.* They focus on approaches that can "integrate artistic voices into the practice of knowledge creation and map out policy pathways for institutions and the community to create longer-term relationships built on equity and reciprocity." This collaboration uses methodologies of crystallization, crystal-scaping, and photovoice to document and share some beautiful and effective experiences within the culture sector.

To round out part one, the final three articles contextualize the work undertaken at RinR with deeper situational, pragmatic, and conceptual considerations. Joanna Taylor expands the focus of this special issue to consider a wide variety of artist residencies (primarily from the US) that have functioned as modalities to assess impact and to rethink governance approaches. The notion of artist residencies was a key foundation for developing the idea of research residencies in RinR, in part to facilitate a better understanding of the extended contributions that deeper qualitative work could accomplish in the sector. Mary Elizabeth Luka and Caroline Klimek analyse a variety of Canadian creative hubs and arts service organizations to expose cracks in the system that have real-life implications for creative workers and organizations, comparing the business models and impact measures used, but also the lived experience of people involved. Finally, Constance DeVereaux and Kate Keeney dig deeply into the academic and sector understandings of "benefit," a term used ubiquitously across the culture sector "for expressing positive outcomes of arts participation." DeVereaux and Keeney's enquiries challenge the multiple and often ambiguous meanings of the term across the sector and in scholarly analyses to systemize and provide nuance in varied understandings of the concept.

We hope that you enjoy these important contributions to the field and look forward to *part two* in 2024.

Special Issue Co-editors:

Mary Elizabeth Luka, *University of Toronto, Canada*

Robin Nelson, *MacEwan University, Canada*

Shawn Newman, *Toronto Arts Foundation, Canada*

Robin Sokoloski, *Mass Culture, Canada*

References

Banks, M. 2010. Autonomy Guaranteed? Cultural Work and the "Art—Commerce Relation". Journal for Cultural Research 14:3, 251-269. https://doi.org/10.1080/14797581003791487

Dempwolf, C Scott, Jennifer Auer, Michelle D'Ippolito. 2014. Innovation Accelerators: Defining Characteristics Among Startup Assistance Organizations. http://rgdoi.net/10.13140/RG.2.2.36244.09602

Essig, L. 2018. Value Creation and Evaluation in Arts Incubators. *International Journal of Arts Management, 20:2*, 32-45. https://www.jstor.org/stable/44989712

Luka, Mary Elizabeth. (2022). Creative Hubs: Sites of Community and Creative Work. In *Creative Industries in Canada*. Eds., Miranda Campbell and Cheryl Thompson, pp. 157-179. Toronto: Canadian Scholars.

Markham, A. N. (2018). Afterword: Ethics as impact—Moving from error-avoidance and concept-driven models to a future-oriented approach. *Social Media & Society*, *4*(3), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118784504

Wenger, É., McDermott, R.A., and Snyder, W. (2002). *Cultivating communities of practice: A guide to managing knowledge*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

[i] For more information, see: https://massculture.ca/research-in-residence/

[ii] MITACS is a nonprofit national research organization that forms partnerships with Canadian academia, private industry and government.

[iii] For more information, see: https://massculture.ca/past-programs/positioning-a-future-forward/

[iv] For more information, see: https://massculture.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Methods-Report-Research-in-Residence-Arts-Civic-Impact-2023.pdf

[v] For more information, see: https://massculture.ca/research-in-residence/living-climate-impact-framework-for-the-arts/

[vi] For more information, see: https://massculture.ca/research-in-residence/spiralling-outwardly-for-equity-in-public-arts/

[vii] For more information, see: https://massculture.ca/research-in-residence/access-in-counterpoint/