Art, health and the evidence debates: practical insights from field research

Christine Putland

Southgate Institute for Health, Society and Equity, Flinders University

The paper explores issues in evaluating the health and wellbeing impacts of arts and cultural initiatives in rural/regional communities. In particular it is concerned with the question of how community level change is demonstrated. Drawing on the experience of evaluating complex multi-dimensional programs, it considers the kinds of research approaches that are appropriate in this context and what can be learned about the wider debates regarding evidence in this field.

With the growth in number, scope and diversity of arts and cultural initiatives being developed with health and wellbeing in mind around the world, comes greater demand for evidence of the benefits of this relationship. The challenges faced in demonstrating these in health terms are well-rehearsed, highlighting the different practice and research traditions represented in the respective disciplines. Researching their intersection in the context of community-based or community-focused programs also foregrounds tensions within each of these fields. In the health sciences, for example, it is argued that researching social and economic determinants demands a different approach from measuring clinical relationships based on bio-medical methods. In the arts, the continuing debates about how to appraise cultural development approaches which cut across individual art forms are reflected in the changing trends in government policies over time. Thus, on the one hand determinants of health and wellbeing at the community level are difficult to attribute and to track, while on the other hand questions of the value of cultural participation versus its artistic products confound the evaluation process. Evaluating the South Australian Regional Centre of Culture (RCC) is a case in point.

As an initiative of the SA government and managed by Country Arts SA, RCC features arts and culture playing a leading role in extensive, region-wide, inter-sectoral partnerships to ‘(re)vitalise’ communities, emphasising:

- all levels of government, major art/cultural institutions and local arts/non-arts groups
- intense exposure to high quality art and cultural experiences over a 12 month period
- ‘introduced’ programming and stimulation combined with support for local initiatives and artists
- diverse art forms and approaches to practice
- access by people with a wide range of ages, interests and backgrounds
- strong local themes reflecting issues of concern to people in the region
- modes of engagement across the spectrum from ‘receptive’ to ‘participatory’.

The RCC is based on experiences documented in Europe and other parts of the world suggesting that offering multiple opportunities for people to engage creatively not only brings the intrinsic satisfaction and enjoyment commonly associated with these experiences, but can also have profound effects on individual quality of life, health and wellbeing, while building the conditions for creative and more resourceful communities in the longer term. The collective effects of programs at the community level are often reported in terms of knowledge and skills, creative and innovative problem-solving, social networks and cohesion, and resourcefulness. Aside from being difficult to define and contentious in terms of their links to health, such concepts are hard to demonstrate within a short-term evaluation framework. But more importantly they do not help us to understand what it is about art and culture in particular that can produce these effects.

Evaluating a multi-dimensional program such as RCC requires a genuinely multi-disciplinary research methodology. Understanding the incipient legacy of a comprehensive community program relies on
more than the sum of the individual parts. In addition to objective measures of overall progress towards goals, different perspectives on the direct experience of participating in the program, surveys of the wider population in the region to determine changes in attitudes and behaviour, an ecological appreciation of how factors interact to change a ’collective state of mind’ is necessary. Based on this example it is argued that the decision about what is appropriate in an evaluation methodology is heavily contextual and rests on what we want to learn from the evidence.