

Creative & Credible

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

Written by Dr Roz Hall with the Creative and Credible Project Team.

Roz Hall is a socially engaged arts practitioner, a photographer who has undertaken independent evaluations for many years, starting with her work with young people in digital media projects (Hall, 2005). Conventional evaluation approaches can be lacking if they do not attempt to understand the meaning of arts participation to people taking part. Participatory Action Research (PAR) is an approach that places the participant at the centre as the person who knows best what has happened and what this has meant in terms of their own life. The PAR approach has informed Roz's extensive work, which includes evaluation of community arts and media projects with participants from a wide range of ages and backgrounds. More information can be found about Roz's work here:

<http://kwmc.org.uk/author/roz-hall/>

<https://circuit.tate.org.uk/author/roz-hall/>

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/drroz>

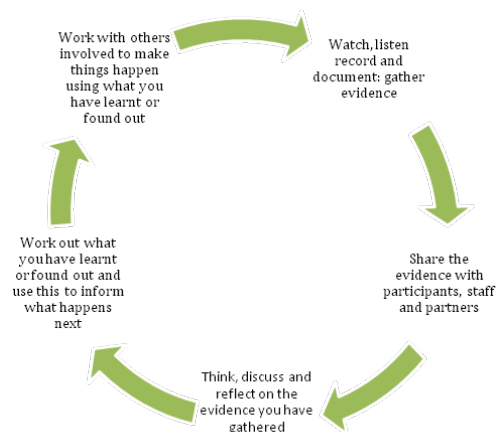
Key messages

Some of the key messages from this work are:

- Evaluation involves unequal power relationships. Approaches such as PAR can empower participants, helping to encourage organic exchange.
- If this is done successfully, young people can be empowered to share insights into their lives and into what the creative process means to them.
- Understanding participants' experiences of arts and health projects needs to develop through dialogue and not in response to themes and outcomes that are pre-determined by evaluators, funders or commissioners.
- Participants' creative work, including photographs, images and music, can strongly inform the evaluation process. Focusing on this allows participants to lead the dialogue.
- Participants may be sceptical about evaluation processes if they are not engaged in the planning of these from the outset.
- PAR means placing the participant in the centre as the person who knows best what has happened and what this has meant in terms of their own life.
- Evaluation needs to be an ongoing processes that is embedded into project delivery rather than something carried out by an evaluator at the end.

Action research undertaken in a reflective cycle (see figure 2) can ensure a greater equality of input into evaluation processes than might be allowed by more formal or rigid processes.

Figure 2. The reflective action research cycle:



Creative approaches in PAR

Arts based approaches can work well in PAR and can include simple techniques that are easy to deliver. One thing that is important is to make sure the approach 'fits' the project and the people who are part of the evaluation. Those undertaking creative evaluation should work with the people involved to devise activities that are meaningful to them.

Some examples are:

- Using different coloured post it notes in designated spaces to generate visual feedback on topics such as highlights of a project or key issues and challenges. Photographs of such displays can add authenticity to project reports.
- Using space and movement as measuring tools, for example, you might ask people to stand to the left of the room if they strongly agree with particular statements, or to the right of the room if they strongly disagree.
- Using photography to illustrate 'before' and 'after' moments.

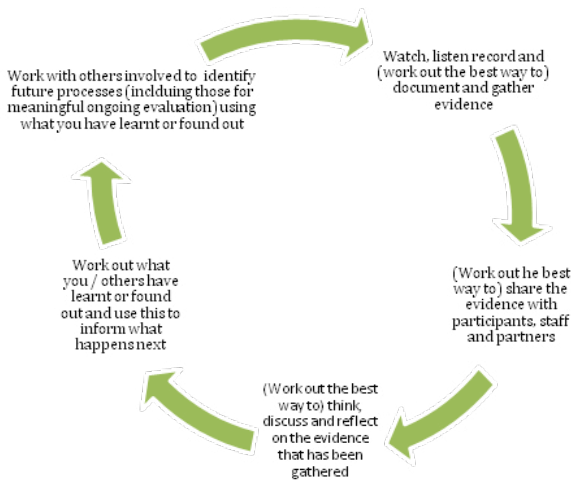
- Using ordinary materials to help evaluation, for example, using paper tablecloths so that people who feel less confident about talking can write or doodle their comments, feedback, ideas and reflections.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I present a revised reflective cycle (Figure 3):

'My conclusion is this, really, that through using an action research approach to devising evaluation activities, as well as using evaluation activities as part of a wider action research process, the two become seamless, so that they aren't just informing each other but become part of the same process (see Figure 3). In this way we might also usefully nurture greater reflexivity amongst all involved, as well as greater reflectivity'.

Figure 3. The (revised) reflective action research cycle:



References

Hall, R. (2005). *The Value of Visual Exploration: Understanding Cultural Activities with Young People*. West Bromwich, The Public.