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Failure seems to be the hardest word to say

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ABSTRACT

Policy interventions, to increase participation, have long been informed by data demonstrating inequity in the subsidised cultural sector. However, it is less clear how evidence is employed to judge success or failure of initiatives to create greater equity. Indeed, quantitative surveys suggest a failure to change patterns of cultural participation. Despite this a large body of evaluation reports celebrate the 'success' of participatory projects. This article presents findings from UK research that explores how cultural participation policies might be improved by better acknowledgment of failures. The research involved interviews, questionnaires, workshops, observations and documentary analysis involving over 200 policymakers, cultural practitioners, and participants. It identified a cultural policy landscape that is not conducive to honesty or critical reflection and argues that without this it will persistently fail to learn or to deliver the scale of change required to create the equity it professes to desire.

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Introduction

A culture of evaluation, to supposedly inform 'evidence-based policy', has been a significant feature of the relationship between cultural policy and practice, in the UK at least, since the 1980's when Myerscough developed his economic case for culture (1988). In the case of cultural participation, which is the focus of this research, much of the policy focus on increasing participation is cited as a response to the data generated in surveys such as Taking Part (DCMS 2018) or the Scottish Household Survey (SHS) (Scottish Government 2018), which show differing and unequal patterns of engagement across a specific list of cultural activities. Both of these examples demonstrate how data and the evidence that data supports can be used to shape and influence high-level policy aspirations and goals. However, advocates of evidence-based policy argue, 'if policy is goal-driven, evaluation should be goal-oriented. Such evaluation completes the cycle and provides feedback to improve the policy' (Sanderson 2002). In other words, if policy is truly 'evidence-based' there should be as much concern with gathering data and evidence of the extent to which policy interventions are, or are not, delivering policy goals as there was in establishing the original need.

In the case of cultural participation, data and evidence has informed the way in which the 'problem' of non-participation has been constructed (Stevenson 2013) as a 'participation deficit' (Miles and Gibson 2017). This in turn has influenced the types of policy interventions that are seen as 'appropriate' to 'fix' the problem (Jancovich 2011). However, it is far less clear how data and evidence have been employed to judge the success or failure of such policy interventions in achieving the goal of 'increasing' cultural participation. Indeed, although repeated iterations of Taking Part and the SHS show a failure to substantially or sustainably change patterns of cultural participation (Warwick Commission 2015) there is a tendency for the discourse around such projects to be one of success (Rimmer 2020) with evaluation

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reports and impact case studies primarily focused on celebrating successes rather than learning from failure (for example: Fun Palaces 2019). Yet these successes are often evidenced with reference to a diverse range of criteria that have little to do with the goal of sustainably increasing diversity and equity within the cultural sector, which many of these projects were ostensibly funded to deliver. Indeed, as we will argue below, through stories of unqualified success the participation agenda has taken a performative turn, in which evaluation practices generate and sustain a narrative that does more to legitimise rather than challenge existing inequities.

This article presents some of the findings from UK research that has considered how cultural participation policies, projects, and practices might be improved by better acknowledgment and discussion of failures. In this wider research, we examine how different stakeholders (including artists, participants, and funders) may define success and failure in different ways, based on different logics and values, but for the purpose of this paper the focus is on policy.

We therefore begin with an examination of how the notion of 'evidence-based policy' has been critiqued in the wider public policy literature. We highlight the growing interest in moving beyond current practices in which evaluation is primarily understood as a tool for monitoring against targets or performance management. We then move on to consider the literature on policy failures and specifically the extent to which policies ever result in outright success or failure. From this, we argue that if evaluation is to be credible and engender the type of learning that leads to meaningful policy change it must fully recognise and reflect on both.

The findings from our research draw on a large body of empirical data, collected via interviews, workshops, and surveys with policymakers, cultural practitioners and participants. In our discussion, we consider the barriers to talking openly about failures; and examine how capturing and sharing narratives of failure might usefully inform the development of cultural policy. Our aim throughout this research has been to develop new insights into the processes of cultural policy making and we conclude with a call for more honest and open critical reflection in the cultural sector, recognising that narratives underpin policy decisions as much as data and evidence.

Evidence-based policy

Beyond the field of cultural policy studies, the notion of evidence-based policy has long dominated the wider field of policy studies (Colebatch 1998). It is founded on the principle of decision-making that 'seek[s] to manage economic and social affairs "rationally" in an apolitical, scientized manner such that social policy is more or less an exercise in social technology' (Schwandt 1997). In other words, it assumes policies will deliver better results if those instigating and implementing them make rational decisions on 'what works' based on a technocratic understanding of 'best practice' rather than through understanding the political values, meanings, and ideologies that underpin decision-making (Clarke, Pawson, and Tilley 1998; Pawson 2012). Yet the evidence base for making claims about the benefits of evidence-based policy has itself come under question. In particular, the concept of rational choice has been challenged for its assumption that data and evidence are neutral objects, not open to interpretation (Sanderson 2002). Furthermore, as Howlett contends, 'an emphasis only upon technical learning may not lessen, but in fact contribute to a continued lack of policy success; that is, repeating over and over again the errors of the past' (Howlett 2012a).

In contrast, the constructivist (Guba and Lincoln 1989) interpretative (Yanow 2000) and argumentative (Fischer and Forester 1993) theoretical traditions all argue for an understanding of the politics of policymaking, and the complexity of the social world in which any knowledge (or evidence) is both constructed and contingent. The rational approach, conducted through the application of objective rules by disinterested observers is therefore rejected (Stone 2012) and instead policymaking, and the analysis that is conducted to inform it, should be seen as political choices (Weiss 1977). From this standpoint, while surveys such as Taking Part and the SHS may inform the construction of a policy problem more attention must be paid to the values and logics that inform policymakers' choices in how they address such problems and in doing so categorise

certain people and behaviours as being more socially valuable than others (Stevenson 2019). As such, the act of evaluation should also be understood as political because it contributes to the construction of normative positions via the questions that are asked and the measures that are employed.

But as Cairney suggests neither the evidence-based nor the political choice perspectives are of themselves an accurate description of what actually happens in the policy process, which he describes as a complex process functioning under conditions of 'bounded rationality' (Cairney 2012, 2016). In reality, the policy process 'weighs beliefs, principles and actions under conditions of multiple frames for the interpretation and evaluation of the world' (Van Der Knaap 1995). From this perspective, evaluation research plays a conceptual rather than instrumental role, 'reaching decision makers in unsystematic and diffuse forms, "percolating" into the policy arena' (Sanderson 2002) through a process of 'disproportionate information processing' (Cairney 2012) rather than rational thought or ideology alone.

Despite these critiques, assumptions about both the prevalence and desirability of evidence-based policymaking has remained widespread (Colebatch 1998; Cairney 2016). In the UK identifying 'robust' evidence is still seen as the cornerstone for policymaking in two distinct ways (Sanderson 2002). The first is accountability that government and its agents are delivering the outcomes they have committed to. Here evidence relates to performance management and is most commonly associated with monitoring and measurement of 'impact'. In the cultural sector, this is what has commonly been criticised as the tendency for research to 'make the case' for culture. The second use of evidence is to inform 'improvement' based on evidence of *how* policy interventions achieve change. The growth in What Works Centres provides an example of this in the UK (Gold 2018). But as Sayers (2020) argues the degree of certainty, of cause and effect, that can be delivered through evidence-based approaches to policymaking such as 'what works' is overstated. Rather than evidencing 'truths', at best they might help to avoid error.

Instead of more 'evidence' others argue that what is needed, but less common in practice, is policy analysis that seeks to pragmatically understand the 'implementation gap' in order to explain not only what works but also for whom and in which circumstances. Such an approach is also as interested in what doesn't work as what does, so as to ensure that similar failures might be avoided in future (Hogwood and Gunn 1984) and the benefits of future interventions can be dispersed more equitably. This is not an argument against the use of evidence, but rather that greater attention needs to be given to the extent that different groups of stakeholders with different lived experiences and drawing on distinct value systems may interpret and experience policy success and failure in very different ways.

For rather than truly objective evidence, it is the construction and replication of a dominant policy narrative that has greatest influence over policy decisions. As such, those who can exert the greatest social power seek to retain control over the articulation of the dominant narrative (Taylor and Balloch 2005). A key element of this control is the ability to frame certain activity as a success, in spite of any evidence to the contrary. Such failures to learn and/or respond to such learning are further policy failures. It is therefore argued that the guiding principle for critical policy analysis should be to address the fundamental questions of: Who learns? Learns what? To what effect? (Howlett 2012a).

Policy failure

Dye (2005) suggests that, in general, governments have little clarity as to whether or not their policies have been successful. However, this does not stop them from framing such interventions as successes (Fischer 2003). Despite an emerging interest in theorising failure within policy studies, there also remains a scarcity of literature that explicitly considers policy failure in practice and even less that specifically considers failure in regard to cultural policy. It has been argued that this is the

result of ‘blame avoidance’ in policy making, which is perhaps the largest barrier to learning and change given that,

...this can amplify policy failures rather than correct them as energy and resources are spent on avoiding blame, denying the existence of failure ... rather than on improving policy (Howlett, Ramesh, and Wu 2015)

Interestingly, it is argued that this is most in evidence within the bodies that appear to be the most accountable. Paradoxically many evaluations that try to demonstrate accountability may in fact reinforce overstated celebratory narratives while failing to examine the ‘root causes’ of problems or the persistent failures that are limiting more significant progress being made (Howlett, Ramesh, and Wu 2015). This, McConnell (2010) argues, can lead to good politics but bad policy.

However, this is not to say that the term ‘failure’ is not used in policy analysis at all, rather that it is used inconsistently, without clear definition. This means that,

... arguments relating to policy failure are not only ambiguous, but they also tend to conflate forms of failure that are actually discrete. This imprecision has led to confusion in theoretical debates as well as uncertainty in policy evaluation, as opposing voices tend to talk past each other rather than contest well-defined positions (Newman and Head 2015)

In response to these difficulties, public policy academics have proposed taxonomies and frameworks to assist in the analysis of policy failure. For example, Bovens *et al* have argued that any evaluation of policies needs to differentiate between programme success/failure and political success/failure (Bovens and T Hart 1996;). While the former is more concerned with effectiveness the latter is more concerned with perception. To this initial classification, McConnell (2010) added a third category, process failures, in order to categorise specific failures related to policy implementation.

Building on this work a review of the existing literature identified that when authors do comment on policy failure(s) they are usually referring to one of four ‘modes’ of failure:

- Objective attainment failure: when policy objectives are not met
- Distributional failure: when some stakeholders groups are negatively affected by the policy
- Political or electoral failure: when politicians are negatively affected
- Implementation failure: when organisational or other obstacles prevent implementation (Newman and Head 2015)

But confusion and conflation between each of these often obscures understanding not least because different modes of failure have different causes. It is argued therefore that any conclusions, recommendations or remedies should be considered in regard to each mode independently. Our own research is informed by these taxonomies but seeks to test their efficacy within the field of cultural policy and in so doing develop a bespoke taxonomy that recognises the different logics, values and meanings that underpin policy making in the cultural sector.

Notwithstanding the existence of what Gray and Hart have dubbed ‘policy disasters’ (2005), it is further noted that policy outcomes are rarely, if ever, outright successes or failures but contain elements of each (McConnell 2010). For example, if the aims, values, and logics of policymakers and practitioners are different their measures of success and failure may also differ. Similarly, policies that don’t meet the initially stated objectives can, nevertheless, be political successes and vice versa. This is particularly the case in regard to those wicked problems (Rittel and Webber 1973) in which governments tend to seek to address symptoms rather than causes (Stringer and Richardson 1980) or to adopt ‘placebo’ policies that are primarily enacted in order to manage a difficult issue down or off of the political agenda (Gustafsson 1983). In such cases policies take on a significant symbolic function, demonstrating a government’s commitment to addressing the perceived problem rather than ‘solving’ it. This has been demonstrated to be the case with cultural participation, where policy interventions are celebrated for widening ‘access’ to culture despite failing to evidence significant and long-term change in the baseline data around which the ‘problem’ of cultural non-

participation was constructed (Stevenson, Balling, and Kann-Rasmussen 2015; Jancovich 2017b). Our research therefore asks what might be learned by understanding the failures that are ignored in current discourse.

Methodology

The wider research project, from which this article draws its analysis, took place over a period of two years, and involved three stages. This paper draws on the first two stages only.

In stage one 8 workshops, with space for 20 people in each, were held with different interest groups. These comprised 2 workshops for policymakers, 2 for arts organisations, 2 for individual artists and 2 for cultural participants. The workshops were creatively facilitated and sought to identify the extent to which these different interest groups had shared or disparate definitions of success and failure in regard to cultural participation policies and projects. Participants in the workshops also discussed whether they saw value in talking about failure and the levers or barriers to doing so. In addition, workshop participants were asked to identify specific examples of success and failure in cultural participation policies and projects they were aware of but had not necessarily been involved in.

Due to the high level of interest in participating in these workshops an anonymous survey was also conducted to allow others to share their stories of failure, which received a further 100 responses.

From the examples of success most cited by workshop participants three case studies were identified for closer analysis in stage 2. These were Creative People and Places (www.creativepeopleplaces.org.uk) an Arts Council action research programme that seeks to examine how place based funding might impact cultural participation; Fun Palaces (<https://funpalaces.co.uk>), an initiative started by two arts activists to shine a light on the skills and everyday creativity that already exist in communities by promoting local DIY cultural events; and Slung Low (www.slunglow.org) a professional theatre company currently co-managing an old working men's club as performance venue and community space.¹ In conducting these case studies, we considered what learning might be gained by examining areas of failure within the work of organisations whose narratives more commonly focused on success.

Stage 2 also involved 83 in-depth qualitative interviews with a larger sample of policymakers, funders, evaluation consultants, cultural professionals, and participants. Through these we further investigated the different meanings of participation given by different agents and their attitudes to failure. All of the interviews were transcribed and the data analysed alongside that generated through the survey and workshops.

Working inductively, a thematic approach to analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was taken, and coding was conducted using the NVivo software. For the purposes of this paper the main themes identified related to the attitudes to and the value given to the notion of failure from professionals in the cultural sector, the way success and failure are evidenced and to what end, and the resultant failures that these attitudes and practices may themselves generate. From this, we have identified a new taxonomy of failures that were used in phase 3² of the research and will be explored in more detail in future outputs from this project.

Given the sensitivity of the topic, the names of all of those who took part in workshops and interviews were anonymised, but the representatives of the case studies agreed to the naming of their organisations, for which we are grateful and hope their example demonstrates the value of sharing stories of failure openly.

Fear of failure

Many of the cultural professionals³ who we spoke to supported the view that 'art and culture can never fail' (policymaker). All were far happier to talk about 'how things could have been better' (cultural professional). Failure was often felt to be too negative a term to employ. Time and again,

words such as 'discomfort', 'unease' and 'unhelpful' were used to describe the way many professionals felt about the word. Some opposed what they saw as the 'binaries' or 'finality' implied by the term although interestingly they did not resist the word success in the same way. Furthermore, most felt you could always find something of value that had been the result of any given cultural activity. However, this value might have nothing to do with the specific intention of 'increasing' and 'widening' access to culture. When asked if a project would have failed if it was intended to diversify the audience for a particular organisation but did not attract anyone who had not been to that organisation before, most interviewees agreed that this would, indeed, have been a failure. But they were doubtful if this were a narrative they would share. This supports the claim from the literature that policies and projects are rarely an outright failure, but need to be assessed against a range of domains that challenge these binary definitions if people are to feel comfortable talking openly about them.

To help challenge the narrative that failure is impossible, or should not be shared, all of those taking part in the workshops, surveys, and interviews were asked to share a story of failure and consider whether they had learnt from it. Significantly, many cultural professionals defaulted to a personal failing, which ranged from being a perfectionist and so having too high expectations of others to experiencing imposter syndrome in their role. While some said they had learned from reflecting on these failings many said it was something they couldn't change or that thinking about it made them feel bad about their abilities.

When subsequently prompted to think of an example related specifically to cultural participation projects the majority of stories told by the cultural professionals were of micro operational failures (such as a van breaking down on the way to a show so it didn't go ahead) or macro systemic failures (such as social inequalities in society at large) that were 'acts of god' which neither they nor the cultural sector could be held accountable for, or do anything about. Few offered any detail about how they had learnt from such failures and many found it an uncomfortable process to share such stories. Although not universal,⁴ it was clear that for many, talking about failure, especially failures related to activity they had been involved in, was highly challenging. For all that several of the cultural professionals interviewed said they had the Samuel Beckett quote 'fail, fail again, fail better' pinned on their office wall, most saw this as an aspiration rather than something they found easy to do.

Our analysis suggests that fear plays a large part in the discomfort exhibited by many of those we spoke with, in regard to publicly describing or acknowledging anything they have been involved in as having failed. Some felt that a fear of failure is common in the UK, rooted in a taboo of educational failure experienced as a child. Despite what some described as a growing business rhetoric around learning from failure it was also often felt that it is becoming harder to talk publicly about failure because of a 'soundbite culture' (evaluation consultant) where 'everyone thinks a mistake is something that should be punished rather than something you can learn from' (participant) and people are 'scared of how their words will be used or abused' (cultural professional). This is indicative of the extent to which it was not the fear of something failing that caused the most discomfort. Rather, it was the fear of being blamed for failures, or being perceived by peers as a failure professionally. It was felt this might affect future contracts, funding and partnerships. This demonstrates the importance that profile and reputation have as a measure of success or failure within the cultural sector, often over and above the purpose of the project or the impact on participation. As we will discuss later in the article, this fear reduces risk taking and encourages the production of uncritical stories of unconditional success from which the sector fails to learn.

Despite this evident discomfort with the label of failure when attached to their own work, many of the interviewees appeared far more at ease talking about failures 'in general', or times they felt they had been failed, or failures they perceived others to have caused. The remainder of the article will discuss some of these failures in more depth while also considering some of the reasons why learning from failures seems so hard to do.

The numbers game

Most of the cultural professionals we spoke to acknowledged that the participation agenda was driven by the evidence that 'publicly funded arts, culture and heritage, supported by tax and lottery revenues, are predominantly accessed by an unnecessarily narrow social, economic, ethnic and educated demographic that is not fully representative of the UK's population' (Warwick Commission 2015), which they saw as a failure of participation. As such, most agreed that the aim of participation initiatives was to address this inequality by reaching out beyond those who are already engaged with subsidised cultural activities.

Yet only a few of those we spoke to considered the extent to which the work they had created or funded had, or had not contributed towards attainment of this high-level policy objective. Instead, interviewees more often spoke about the extent to which cultural participation projects resulted in 'individuals whose life has been transformed' (evaluation consultant). There were multiple references to improving health and wellbeing, increasing citizenship, and contributing to social cohesion. All of these narratives frame the participant as the problem who needs to be 'fixed' rather than the policies, projects and practices that create and sustain structural inequities in regard to how different people's cultural lives are valued and supported.

This is not to suggest that those receiving funding are not concerned with capturing evidence about who they work with. Each of our case studies record demographic data about their audiences and celebrate the fact that their participants are more diverse than other organisations they know of. Who and how people participate is therefore also a clear criterion for measuring success or failure. But as our case study, Slung Low demonstrated, numeric data does not provide neutral evidence but can be used to create whatever narrative is needed. For example, they cited the fact that only eight people from their local community had engaged in their recent programme of work, with most participants coming from further afield. As their total numbers had increased and the previous season only engaged four local people, they argued that this could be presented as a success (100% increase in local participation and increased profile further afield) or a failure (numbers of participants from the local community continued to be low). But in reality, they believed it is only a deeper, and more nuanced understanding of the processes involved and the challenges faced in developing new audiences that has any value for shared learning. However, despite seeing the value in understanding the successes and failures in their process they felt compelled to focus their attentions on controlling a narrative that would maintain their profile.

For others collecting 'evidence' often became more about overall numbers than about the diversity of who participates. For all that one of the founders of Fun Palaces said 'hashtag – it's not about the numbers' several of the Fun Palace local volunteers felt that the evaluation form they were sent by the head office was 'all about numbers'. For staff working on Creative People and Places a commonly held view was that 'it's absolutely not about numbers [but there's] a massive pressure to always have numbers'. Similarly, policymakers told us that it's not 'about numbers [but] without the numbers you can't start the conversation'.

But this acceptance of the need to play the 'the numbers game' (cultural professional) as inevitable, was also seen to detract from the high-level aspiration of supporting a more diverse range of people to participate in culture, by focusing on quantity, as an easily measurable target, over a more nuanced discussion about the purpose of the activity or the process of delivery.

Many found it difficult to determine who had set the quantitative objectives they were required to report on. But they felt that this encouraged certain types of work, such as spectacle, which might achieve short-term numbers but not long-term change. Furthermore, there was lack of confidence in the value of this data beyond merely monitoring activity. There was no evidence of funders aggregating the monitoring data they received back to meaningfully assess the effectiveness of funded projects in delivering the purpose or objectives of the policy aim to create a permanent change to the diversity of people whose cultural lives are being valued and supported. Indeed, a number of our interviewees cited examples of policies or projects they knew had not delivered

significant or enduring change yet saw the same organisations receiving more funding to repeat the same type of projects.

Short-term successes but long-term failures?

For the project participants interviewed one of the ways in which they told us cultural policy and projects consistently fail is by failing to recognise their lived experience as cultural participants, in particular in regard to the cultural activities they already engage with:

I often go to places that are considered to be low income, low participation in the arts, and people do all sorts of creative things (participant)

Real cultural participation happens every single day (participant)

This particular failure was recognised by many of the cultural professionals who often showed awareness of the growing body of evidence around the prevalence of 'everyday participation' (Miles and Gibson 2016). This led a number to acknowledge that:

... there's a real arrogance within a lot of arts organisations that they know what would be good for that community (cultural professional)

... it's not working, because it doesn't recognise, it doesn't nourish the cultures that are there (cultural professional)

One of the key reasons why the statistics are so disappointing is because we are proposing a definition of culture which does not match the way in which culture is defined by a lot of people today (evaluation consultant)

Yet despite such acknowledgements it was recognised that there was 'a failure to follow through in terms of funding' to support the range of cultural activities that people take part in (policymaker) and an almost unanimous assumption that this would not change.

In part, this despondency stemmed from the recognition of another recurring failure, namely the preference for funding short-term projects that everyone knew could not be sustainable once the funding ended (irrespective of what they promised in the funding application). Many artists and arts managers spoke about the extent to which this encouraged 'safe' output-based work that could be easily reported on rather than developing work that could embed permanent structural changes within the cultural sector. Time and again we heard people say the same things:

... the biggest failure is that it hasn't continued (participant)

... it's worse, isn't it, if you're given something and you have a really good time and then it's taken away (cultural professional)

... while the money was in place, they made interesting moves, but the minute there was no more money in place ... one of the real problems for us was about trying to embed real cultural change and change in practice (policymaker)

... the biggest issue with organisations getting funding to work in areas of deprivation is that they come in, they do the project and they get the money, then they report and leave again ... I think that would be a failure on their part, but nobody would notice, because they would have completed the project and reported [on it] (cultural professional)

This failure was evident in one of our case studies, Creative People and Places, which despite having the aspiration for long-term sustainability stated in the programme objectives, had the project mentality built in to its programme design. Places chosen to be part of the programme were given large amounts of funding at the start that decreased every three years, whatever their research and evaluation found.

I think if we are trying to achieve a more equitable cultural sector ... to not sustain the investment in it, or to, you know, massively cut it each time, just to me feels ... I don't understand that (cultural professional)

All the staff from Creative People and Places who were spoken to reinforced this point and the chief funder – Arts Council England – further endorsed this. Yet despite being described as an action research project and having gone through four phases of funding this fundamental aspect of the programme design remains unchanged. This is a clear example of failing to implement policy alterations, even in the face of evidence indicating the necessity to do so.

Interestingly, the place-based approach to funding which is at the heart of Creative People and Places has been adopted in other countries (Jancovich 2017a), including Wales and Scotland where we also interviewed policymakers as part of this research. While some of those interviewed in these other nations said they had learnt from the problems in Arts Council England's programme design, they said this was not based on the sharing of evidence or policy learning between the different agencies. Instead, they said learning was limited by the fact that Creative People and Places had only been promoted as a success story. Any differences in the place-based approaches between the three countries were therefore based on hearsay or rumour (in other words narratives not evidence), personal gut feeling of the policymakers involved, or a desire to put their own mark on their approach. This further questions the extent to which policy-making is an evidence-based process and adds weight to the argument that framing the narrative may be as, if not more influential than building the evidence base.

'Making the case'

There was consensus amongst artists and arts managers that the biggest barrier to talking more openly about failure, in a manner that would engender learning and encourage change, was the perceived prevalence of evaluation, performance management, and accountability frameworks. This supports the argument made earlier that a focus on accountability may reduce honesty rather than encourage it (Howlett, Ramesh, and Wu 2015). Significantly, the language of meeting objectives was often used interchangeably with meeting expectations, which suggests a desire to please someone else's agenda, and acknowledges the subjectivity of the data from the outset. These expectations were commonly based on second-guessing what different stakeholders wanted rather than 'grown up conversations between all parties' (policymaker).

Many of those we spoke to who had delivered or managed participation programmes exhibited a lack of confidence in defining success and failure on their own terms. They also expressed a pressure from funders to 'over promise' when setting out their objectives in applications. This is at odds with the nature of participatory work where by definition 'you can't always know [your objectives] until you've got the end result with the people' (cultural professional). But while many of those receiving funding often felt they were measuring success against objectives they did not set or necessarily support, some funders described a 'self-elevating rhetoric' in reporting dubious achievements that came from the arts organisations themselves. For some, obscuring project failures was endemic in the arts due to its 'self-congratulatory insularity' (funder) and across the board there was frustration that objectives were neither fully owned nor understood by any party.

Furthermore, a key principle of participation theory is that participants should be involved in a cyclical process from setting the objectives to evaluating the outcomes and informing how to take the work forward (Jancovich 2017b). Yet such inclusive and reflective involvement of participants, in defining success and failure, appeared to be the exception rather than the rule. Despite the cultural project participants we spoke with telling us that one form of failure would be 'failing to meet participants needs' rarely did any of the cultural professionals in our sample talk about the extent to which their priorities had been formed or altered by participants. Nor was meeting the participants' expectations and accountability to the participants themselves, rather than the funders, commonly cited as a factor in considering the relative success/failure of a project.

Where participants were spoken to as part of an evaluation it was mostly commonly structured around questions to measure the objectives that had been on the initial funding application, rather than to assess whether those objectives were relevant in the first place. There was also no evidence

of evaluations including the opinions of those who opted not to take part, despite the recognition that 'you have to look at it through the lenses outside the room as well' (evaluation consultant). While most of the cultural professionals recognised the importance of capturing different voices they tended to use these different voices to tell a single narrative, often around the transformational impact of the work on individuals. But when evaluations fail to explicitly recognise conflicting perspectives and narratives it raises questions about whose lived experience matters most and the extent to which the invitation to 'participate' extends to challenging the 'official' narrative about the efficacy or even desirability of cultural participation projects and policies.

While many funders agreed that evaluations should offer something more than monitoring data in order to transparently account for expenditure, the distinction between monitoring and evaluation appears to be commonly misunderstood, forgotten or ignored. This results in reports, increasingly written by professional evaluators, which are 'too often only looking back when [they] should be looking back with a future-oriented agenda' (evaluation consultant). Indeed, most interviewees who had been the recipients of funding spoke about the need for evaluations, not in relation to learning, but rather as necessary tools with which to 'make the case'⁵ for continued funding based on what McConnell (2010) defines as 'political success' or what we have defined above as profile. The extent to which narratives that support the profiles of individual artists and organisations are prioritised over honesty about how the initiative has succeeded or failed in its purpose or processes, is indicative of a collective failure in the cultural sector to consider the extent to which current approaches to supporting cultural participation are failing to make a difference to the entrenched inequity that presently exists.

Failing to learn

Many of those who took part in our research said afterwards that they found the opportunity to talk explicitly about failures as cathartic, liberating or a learning experience. Yet almost everyone said that they had experienced little to no opportunities to do this in such a candid manner before. Even the professionals, who said they had already acknowledged the value in learning from failure, felt their reflections were most likely to take place on a personal and private basis. It was much less common for such discussions to be shared across teams and almost never with participants or funders. Where they did take place it was always in the context of 'safe spaces' (cultural professional) with trusted peers.

In the case of Fun Palaces, there was recognised to be great value in sharing learning between different places. But the volunteer nature of the programme meant many of those we interviewed felt that in practice the only people who had the capacity to share their experiences were the paid regional ambassadors. The local volunteer organisers did not feel engaged in this process, let alone the participants who attended events, whose voices were collected through very standard satisfaction surveys. Furthermore, the regional ambassadors we spoke to said that even among themselves there was a tendency, encouraged by the design of the evaluation, to share good news stories rather than discuss failures.

Within Creative People and Places there is funding to support a national peer-learning network. Staff from the programme all said that this did provide a safe space and that the longer the network had existed the more honest people felt they could be about failure within this. But most described the sharing of failure as a space for professionals to vent rather than learn. No one could think of any examples that led to programme or process change. Furthermore, while most Creative People and Place areas involve participants in decision-making on the artistic programme there is less evidence of them being involved at other points in the planning cycle such as agenda setting and evaluation. Despite the peer network also organising an annual conference which invites in the wider cultural sector many of those interviewed said what was presented in these forums was celebratory and promotional and did not encourage critical dialogue about the failures that had occurred or the changes that were necessary.

For Slung Low, without being part of a network like the other two cases, while they were committed to the principle of sharing their learning across the sector, they said the reality of day-to-day life meant they rarely even had time to reflect among themselves as a team, let alone with participants. The participants of Slung Low we spoke to described them as a very open organisation, which was willing to listen but the nature of producing work always meant that they were on to the next project and so it became difficult to embed the learning.

In our wider sample, there was also a sense that, for all a number of cultural professionals talked about ‘the right to fail’ as a vital part of the creative process, there was also some doubt about how much the majority of those receiving funding wanted or were able to reflect critically on their own failures:

... the failure I see more regularly is that organisations don't want to adjust and change (cultural professional)

[The problem is with] the ones who don't see themselves as failing, so they would never come and say, “we've failed” because they wouldn't acknowledge that that's the issue (policymaker)

Or as one funder retorted:

... they [organisations and individuals receiving funding] say we need to be allowed to fail ... everybody's allowed to fail, the point is to learn ... if you want carte blanche to not get it right again then that's pointless

Within the UK cultural sector, a culture of truly critically reflective learning (Hanson 2013) appears either absent or at best simulated through the production of tactically constructed project reports and evaluations.

There was also scant evidence of funders critically evaluating their own funding strategies and the logics on which they are based. As noted above, there is scarce evidence of funders aggregating the data and information they receive back through evaluation reports in order to draw conclusions about the extent to which their own processes are working or whether the funding being distributed was cumulatively delivering their high-level aims and purpose. In turn, this has led to deep frustration and scepticism amongst the practitioners we spoke to about whether such evaluation reports are ever read:

... literally thousands of post-lottery grant reports sitting in a kind of data graveyard (evaluation consultant)

I have noticed very little interest in learning really ... what is the point of spending months doing this, bothering people, doing dozens of interviews and then the report is not even read by the people who then make decisions (evaluation consultant).

Those interviewees we spoke to who worked for trusts and foundations readily recognised this failing and were able to point to specific actions they were taking to evaluate themselves more robustly. Although those who worked for arts councils and local authorities shared many of the same concerns, it was also evident they shared a similar pressure to those they funded around ‘making the case’ for continued subsidy and support from government. As one public sector funder said during a workshop ‘civil servants and ministers are looking for good news stories, they don't want to hear about what's gone wrong’.

Overall, when talking about the nature of evaluation and where the learning from failure should take place there was a tendency from all of our interviewees to relocate the responsibility elsewhere. The policymakers were less willing to explore the failures in their own programme designs but tended to expect that the organisations they fund should be more honest about what they had or had not achieved. The organisations receiving funding either passed the blame back to the funder for being too instrumental in what they wanted measuring, or down to the artist for not being able to deliver what was expected. Similarly, some artists passed blame both up the chain to the organisation or funder for setting unrealistic goals and down to the participant for not appreciating the opportunity on offer. It would appear that this perpetual process of passing the buck encourages a culture of evaluation that is more concerned with blame avoidance, ‘box-ticking’ and professional

protectionism than collective social learning predicated on a shared responsibility to make cultural participation in the UK more equitable.

Conclusion

Our research has found a cultural policy landscape in the UK that is not conducive to honesty, critical reflection or learning from failures. Through our research on cultural participation policies and projects we have shown there to be a lack of trust and open dialogue between participants, artists, cultural organisations and funders, which we posit may have wider implications across all areas under the jurisdiction of cultural policy.

A fear of losing funding and future work or damaging professional reputations is resulting in a tendency, for those working in the cultural sector, to reproduce narratives of success and to prioritise blame avoidance over meaningful learning. We argue that, as a result, the chance of success in achieving the intended purpose of a policy, even within the narrow terms of an individual programme, is itself reduced. The desire to demonstrate success discourages risk taking and encourages repetition of past mistakes. It further prevents learning from which the cultural sector might implement the structural changes needed to engender greater equity. For all that our interviewees told us the purpose of cultural participation policies was to create a more equitable cultural sector, it appears that achieving success in this regard is far less important than the profile success of self-preservation.

As such, cultural participation policies and projects have taken on a significant symbolic function, demonstrating an institutional or individual commitment to addressing the perceived problems of engaging specific publics, rather than attempting to understand, let alone 'solve' the problem in a more objective sense. Consequently, ambiguity becomes an essential part of policy formation and evaluation (Zahariadis 2003) and 'feel-good' narratives about success (Stone 2012) are employed to help to build and sustain advocacy coalitions (Sabatier 1988) concerned with maintaining the status quo.

However, the value that these 'feel-good' narratives have delivered for the profile of the UK cultural sector is by no means an outright success either as the legitimacy of public subsidy for arts and culture continues to be questioned in a way that, for example, education and health are not. As one policymaker said, 'there is no shortage of evidence [about the value of cultural subsidy] the gap is the ability to convince' (policymaker). So while demands to 'better' evidence the 'value' of art and culture continue to take up a significant amount of time and resource, the focus on success arguably contributes to this continued failure to convince.

We contend that the only learning being prioritised is that which May (1992) describes as 'political' but which we have defined as profile, whereby those seeking to advocate for their own position within the field of cultural policy aim to better advance their arguments and ideas. In short, those who can exert most influence within the UK cultural sector primarily want to learn how to make *their* case better. Yet unless and until the UK cultural sector also acknowledges and learns from failures of process, practice and participation they will never deliver the scale of change required to create the sort of equity and inclusion they claim is the purpose of such work. As such, we tentatively offer a new taxonomy of success and failure, building on the findings above to include not only profile, but also purpose, process, participation and artistic practice as the 5 facets of cultural participation projects and polices that must all be examined if policy learning (May 1992) is to truly occur. Furthermore, ever more eloquent evaluations employing the same narratives of empowerment and transformation must give way to critical reflection (Hanson 2013) that draws on different perspectives and narratives, recognising success and failure as being opposite ends of a spectrum rather than existing in binary opposition. Such work must be honest in recognising that a policy or project that succeeds for one group, community, or organisation might fail for another and that any successes may not be understood as such by all of the stakeholders. To adapt Howlett's (2012b) position on policy analysis, if we accept that success

and failure are contingent on whose perspective we are looking from then policy evaluation must seek to answer: Success and failure for whom? To what degree? To what effect? It is these questions we are encouraging those working in the cultural sector to explore as part of the final stage of our research project.

Notes

1. We had initially planned to have a case study from at least one of the other nations of the UK but failed to find a suitable organisation willing to waive anonymity. However, additional interviews were conducted with representatives from a number of these organisations.
2. Stage 3 of the project involved the creation of an interactive website (<https://failspaceproject.co.uk/>) to trial a new taxonomy of success/failure for cultural participation policies and projects.
3. Throughout this article, we use the term 'cultural professionals' to refer to arts managers, participation workers, and artists. Evaluation consultants, funders, and policymakers are labelled separately.
4. Some professionals and many participants were more willing to embrace the term. It appeared from our sample that those who had followed less traditional education and career paths were least fearful of talking about failure, but there was insufficient data to confirm this hypothesis.
5. Funders from local authorities and the arts councils were more sensitive to the need for 'making the case' than funders from independent trust and foundations.

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