

# Arts Research Seminar Report

## No 1: Measuring the Impact of Culture?

*The first in a series of seminars organised by Arts Research Ltd, to examine the impact of research on practice in the cultural sector, took place at the University of Northumbria on 16th June 2000. Phyllida Shaw reports on Measuring the Impact of Culture?*

The opportunity to discuss the methodologies used to research the social and economic impact of the arts and the influence of this research on practice attracted a capacity audience of 70 people to the University of Northumbria. Except 'audience' is a misleading term in this instance. In a departure from the usual format of such events, there were no speakers. Most of the day was spent in small group discussions, prompted by papers that had been circulated in advance. The participants, who included subscribers to Arts Research Digest, policy makers and funders with national, regional and local responsibility, arts managers, arts marketers, academics, researchers and consultants, came together twice during the day to share their observations and recommendations.

### Key Questions

The papers circulated before the seminar raised some key questions about the purpose of social and economic impact studies in the cultural sector; about the methodologies used to measure impacts of different kinds and about how practice in this area of research is developing.

The questions considered during the course of the day included the following. To what extent are the methodologies used to measure the impact of the arts overly influenced by short-term policy and financial considerations? What have we learned about the relative value of qualitative and quantitative data in impact studies? How far is it appropriate for the arts to borrow methodologies from other sectors? What other methodologies are there?

The seminar considered whether a commitment to measuring the social impact of the arts applies to all areas of arts activity, or whether the real purpose is the measurement of the impact of the arts on people who are in some way disadvantaged. There was debate about the financial and organisational capacity of less well resourced arts organisations to participate in or benefit from impact studies.

There were questions, too, about the dissemination of research findings and about whether the traditional ways in which academics disseminate their 'new knowledge' militates against a dynamic relationship between them and the arts practitioners who might wish to use it.

### Observations and Ideas

The discussion was organised into two parts: the morning focusing on research into social impact and the afternoon on research into economic impact. The extent to which the content

of the two sessions overlapped demonstrated the fact that the social and economic impacts of the arts and discussion of the methodologies used to measure those impacts are inextricably linked.

The extent to which the purpose of impact studies determines or should determine the methodology used was discussed at length. It was pointed out that while research is classically defined as 'new knowledge' for its own sake, research into the impact of the arts is most commonly undertaken to demonstrate the value of the arts in economic, social or cultural terms.

There is still a lack of understanding and consequent mistrust of impact studies in the cultural sector. The purpose of a study must be clear not only to those commissioning it and conducting it, but to those who may be affected by its findings. It is crucial that the purpose, methodology, findings and recommendations (if any) of the study can be explained in lay terms. There is still a need to provide arts managers with the skills to commission and manage research.

It was generally agreed that the arts sector had succeeded in persuading government at central and local level to pay more attention to the contribution of the arts to society but now it is being asked to produce evidence of that contribution. As a relatively recent arrival on the impact study scene, the arts sector has had a tendency to adopt the language of other sectors in describing the impact of its work. There was a view that arts practitioners are becoming more confident about using their own language, as well as the language of others where appropriate.

It was recognised that the qualitative approach used by many arts organisations to evaluate their work is not necessarily considered (by politicians and civil servants) to be rigorous enough for an impact study, yet there was some optimism that this is one area in which research is starting to influence practice. Since the publication of François Matarasso's work on the measurement of social impact, in particular, more credence is being given to the idea that there are valid qualitative measures that may be used.

Concern was expressed that social impact research has tended to become confused with the research into the role of the arts in addressing social exclusion. If the social impact of the arts is of interest to government, local government and the arts funding bodies, then it should be taking place across the arts sector among organisations of all types and sizes. If, on the other hand, the designers and commissioners of research are essentially interested in measuring the impact of the arts on individuals and communities that are impoverished or otherwise disadvantaged, then the term 'social impact study' takes on a different meaning and one which needs to be explained to those participating in such studies. The view of the seminar was that for social impact research to limit itself to certain types of community or arts activity is neither desirable nor justifiable.

There was an appeal for consistency in the categories used when measuring economic impact. It was pointed out that local

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authorities, government departments and arts funding bodies are using terms such as cultural industries, creative industries and the arts and creative industries to describe quite different activities. Common definitions of an activity are essential to our ability to assess its impact over time. The challenge is that the cultural sector is not intrinsically coherent and there are those who don't consider it a sector at all. At the very least it is a series of sub sectors for which economic characteristics, outputs and outcomes will be different, according to which sub sectors are included in any one study.

It was also pointed out that the working environment of the creative industries is in a constant state of flux and researchers into economic impact need a detailed understanding of the changes that are taking place. There was discussion about the freelance and part-time nature of much employment in the sector, which makes it difficult to assess the number of jobs created or sustained. There was discussion, too, about the on-line dissemination of music which has potentially catastrophic financial implications for one of the UK's biggest export earners, ie the sale of recorded music.

Another area in which research was thought to have influenced practice was in the definition of 'local impact'. It was suggested that local could be defined to mean any kind of community, geographical or otherwise. This makes the measurement of the impact of very small-scale activities on particular groups of participants (eg teenagers) more feasible.

There was much discussion about the unsatisfactory nature of short-term impact studies and about the need for longer-term (longitudinal) research. Reference was made to 'the hired gun approach' to measuring impact which may serve immediate needs, but proves nothing in the long term. It was agreed that for the true impact of the arts to be understood, whether in economic, social or cultural terms, ways had to be found to measure that impact over time.

There were several challenges here, apart from the expense and organisational complexity of longitudinal studies. One, as noted above, is the rapidly changing profile of the sector. A baseline drawn today will bear little relation to the activities of certain parts of the sector 20 years from now. A second concern was the vulnerability of some qualitative methodologies to changes in fashion and values. Studies that made use of anecdote and verbal or written descriptions by participants would need to take into account the way vocabularies and values alter over 20 years and the changing context in which arts activity will be taking place. These reservations apart, there was widespread agreement that longitudinal studies are essential.

Most participants agreed that the dissemination of research findings is not as effective as it should be, if it is to influence practice. It was thought unlikely that there were undiscovered means of dissemination but it was felt that existing means were under used. It was proposed that dissemination budgets should allow for publication in different forms and at different levels of

detail, so that new knowledge may be made available to audiences of different kinds. It was acknowledged that while there are journals that attempt to inhabit a realm that is both academic and practical, there is a snobbery in the academic world which means these journals are rarely counted in the Research Assessment Exercise and researchers may, consequently, be reluctant to submit their work for publication.

There were calls for stronger links between the academic community and the arts community to increase the likelihood of the researcher and the user of research getting the most from each other. It was pointed out that artists and arts managers do work in higher education institutions and that researchers do sit on arts boards and that the distance between individual academics and arts practitioners may not be as wide as is sometimes assumed. The challenge is to overcome the institutional barriers.

Both academics and practitioners, together with independent researchers, belong to an arts research community. It was proposed that just as Arts & Business had promoted the closer involvement of business with the arts, so there should be encouragement of arts organisations to invite researchers on to their boards and of academic assessment panels to include arts practitioners.

The discussion concluded with an observation that the arts research community might be overlooking an opportunity. The 1980s was the decade of economic impact, the 1990s the decade of social impact. Perhaps the time is now right to concentrate on measuring the cultural impact of the arts on society. It may be that the measurement of economic impact should be left to economists; that social impact should be left to social scientists and that ways to measure the cultural impact of the arts should become the specialist field of the arts research community. After the collection of numbers and after the analysis of qualitative data about a programme of activity or event, we are too often left with the question: 'And what happened next?' This, the seminar concluded, was a field of study on which the arts research community could make a real impact.