

How do the public engage with culture?

Heather Maitland explores what we know about the way people experience the arts and what we are learning from this ...

Research into public engagement with cultural activities divides into four areas:

- What kind of people visit, attend and participate in culture and who is missing?
- What types of activity do they engage with and what is the crossover between them?
- What motivates people to engage, and what prevents them?
- How do people actually experience a particular cultural activity?

Taking Part is commissioned by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), surveying 29,000 people each year to answer the first two questions. Detailed findings for different regions and art forms are useful for benchmarking our own research into public engagement with our arts organisation and can be downloaded from the Arts Council England website.¹ You can download an annual report with data on visits to museums and galleries from the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) website.²

Research into motivations and barriers to cultural attendance is abundant. Arts Council England commissioned extensive research as part of their *Arts Debate* published in February 2007.³

But a lot of the research into motivations is misleading, particularly quantitative research carried out by individual organisations. We have a tendency to restrict our research to what we think they ought to be motivated by, giving respondents options from a list we have compiled.

The reason for this limited view is twofold. First, we are usually researching whether we have achieved our stated objectives, e.g. whether a museum visitor has learned what we intended from their visit. Second, our understanding of how people actually experience a cultural experience is limited, particularly in the performing arts.

The most useful research takes an open approach, seeking to identify motivations by finding out how people experience a particular cultural activity. There's plenty of research into how people experience exhibitions in museums and galleries and a useful cross-section has been collected together into one book.⁴ One of the researchers, Colette Dufresne-Tassé, offers a psychological framework for analysing visitors' experiences that we could use in our own organisations. She concludes that adults don't go to a museum to learn something. Instead they are gaining pleasure from the intensity of their emotional and intellectual experience. They gain pleasure from seeing beautiful things and from managing to do something challenging and from using their intellectual skills to imagine, remember, reflect and modify their ideas.⁵

There is much less exploratory research into experiences of the performing arts. In the one exploratory project I was able to track down, researchers were commissioned to find out what impact pre-performance talks had on audiences' enjoyment and their confidence in interpreting dance. They discovered that audience members who had attended a talk didn't feel any more confident and

rated their enjoyment in a similar way to those that hadn't. What made the difference was the time spent after the performance thinking about and discussing what they had seen. The report concludes that the most effective way to build confidence would be post-performance events where the audience talks rather than listens to an 'expert'.⁶

So, why the lack of research into engagement with the performing arts? Perhaps because it is so much more difficult to assess people's reactions in an auditorium. Certainly, one of the key methodologies used in museums and galleries – recording people talking aloud about what they are thinking while they go round an exhibition – would be a tad intrusive in a classical music concert.

This makes Alan Brown's latest research particularly exciting. He explored attenders' 'readiness to receive' a performance as well as their reactions afterwards.

His results show that *how* people approach an event is important. People with high expectations of the performance tended to enjoy themselves more. The researchers couldn't prove a cause and effect between an attender's level of prior experience and knowledge and how much they enjoyed it because of the variables involved (the performance might have been awful) but there is clearly a link. The research also showed that most ticket buyers choose events that they feel comfortable with. Alan Brown points out that outreach and marketing before the event may have helped create an audience member's feeling that they are within their comfort

1. www.artscouncil.org.uk/aboutus/project_detail.php?sid=13&id=373
2. www.mla.gov.uk/resources/assets//T/Taking_Part_11721.pdf
3. e.g. www.artscouncil.org.uk/artsdebate/ArtsDebate_public_findings_summary.pdf
4. **Eilean Hooper-Greenhill** (ed.), *Museums, Media, Message* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1995)
5. **Dufresne-Tassé, Colette**, 'Andragogy (Adult Education) in Museums: a critical analysis and new formulation', *Museums, Media, Message*, ed. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (Abingdon: Routledge, 1995) pp 245-260
6. **Glass, Renee and Stevens, Catherine**, 'Making Sense of Contemporary Dance: an Australian investigation into audience interpretation and enjoyment levels', downloaded at http://marcs.uws.edu.au/people/stevens/pubs/Glass_ConcConns_eforum.pdf (4/1/2006)

zone. He suggests, though, that we should explore other ways of increasing anticipation and levels of prior knowledge of the performance.

Being captivated by the performance and losing track of time is closely linked to high satisfaction with the performance. But this varies dramatically between different events and between performances of the same event in different venues. This level of captivation is strongly affected by temperature, lighting and comfort of the seats as well as the knowledge, experience and ability to empathise of the individual audience member.

Intellectual stimulation is important and Brown suggests that a possible benchmark would be the proportion of attenders who say that they had an intense discussion after the event. He also identifies a relationship between emotional and spiritual impact and levels of satisfaction with the performance. He argues convincingly, though, that satisfaction is too much of a blunt instrument for measuring the value of a performance. The most important outcome of this research is to offer us a toolkit of indicators of intrinsic impact that means we can phase out this blunt instrument.

You can download the research from www.wolfbrown.com/index.php?page=books. Or you can hear all about it from the man himself at the AMA's conference: *WHY? – discovering the secrets of public behaviour and the arts* at The Sage Gateshead in July www.a-m-a.co.uk/conference08.asp ■



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Audience members at 'Being Here The Event', Southend-on-Sea 2006.
Photograph by Ruth Knight