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Measuring the intrinsic benefits of arts attendance

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Measuring the intrinsic benefits of arts attendance

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There is an emerging dissatisfaction with the current evaluative regimes for the quality and effectiveness of funded arts organizations. Far too much evaluation rests on audience satisfaction surveys and quantitative measures of audience attendance numbers, production numbers and revenue sources. The intrinsic benefits of the arts to audiences and to society are recognized to be of major importance, but the means to measure these in an acceptable and on-going manner has not been found. This article changes that. It shows, through almost three years of data collection on arts audiences, that a newly developed and tested Arts Audience Experience Index can be used and embedded by companies and government funding agencies to measure the audience experience of quality, alongside other acquittal tools.

Keywords: arts audiences; performing arts funding acquittal

Introduction

Audiences are at the core of cultural production. The concepts of supply and demand in the arts peaked in the development of the creative industries in the 1990s, and became the principles of government policy and government funding. Audience development for both educative and economic futures became, and continues to be, the driver of cultural and creative production. The concern, however, is how the impact of audience development is measured, which predominantly has been in increased attendance numbers and increased box office or purchase income. Scant attention has been paid to the capacity of audiences themselves to contribute to their development and to the sustainability of an arts organization. The research for this article shows that audiences do describe and respond to the quality of a performance or production, and data defining the intrinsic benefits of their experience can be collected and measured.

Background

Quality measurement in the performing arts is critical to policy makers, government funders, foundations and sponsors who evaluate competitive bids for support and are required to substantiate investment through achievement of set measures: quality or excellence, identity, reputation and access. Quality is a core value of the Australia Council for the Arts, enshrined in the Australia Council Act 1975 as its first function: “to promote excellence in the arts”.

Initially, the principle of allowing “quality” to direct government arts funding decisions had two implications for performing arts policies. First, funds were pooled in order to provide grants
to a small number of companies, which, it was hoped, “would thereby be enabled to perform at high levels of competence by international standards”, otherwise known as the “few but roses” policy. Second, professional artists were given significant decision-making power as to who the “roses” were: artists made up the great majority of the art-form specific boards, and grants were decided through peer review. Underpinning these policies was a belief that decisions about what constituted quality were best left to experts – in this case professional artists.

Since the establishment of Australia’s system of arts administration, successive generations of public inquiries (Cultural Ministers Council, 2002; Industries Assistance Commission, 1976; McLeay, 1986; Nugent, 1999) have investigated and made recommendations on the way public funding has been allocated to the performing arts. These reports have often been critical of the fact that public funding has privileged the “supply side” of artistic production with too little attention to demand for the arts. Increasingly, these inquiries called for more research into the demographics and interests of potential audiences. By the late 1990s, the Australia Council, government departments responsible for the arts and culture, and performing arts companies became the beneficiaries of greatly improved research on audience demographics and interests (Costantoura, 2001). Federal and state government arts agencies now produce guides for arts organizations into developing and using audience research (for example, Australia Council for the Arts, 2009a, 2009b; Tomlinson & Roberts, 2006).

Arts agency grant application guidelines require arts organizations to provide evidence of their capacity to deliver their programme based on data such as number of performances/events and number of paid attendances, along with data on visitor feedback, critical reviews, audience reviews, and media and peer reportage (Arts Victoria, 2008). Such reporting frameworks are commonplace conventional measures of quality used by arts funding agencies as a means of evaluating and assessing applications for funding in a highly competitive environment.

The drift away from cultural and aesthetic rationales for arts funding decisions towards these “instrumentalist” rationales is analysed in international cultural policy and arts management research (Gray, 2007). In this context, instrumentalism refers to public support for the arts on the basis of the perceived benefits to other policy concerns rather than their qualities as arts experiences. These other policy concerns are generally social (such as access for the disadvantaged, greater social inclusion and creating social capital) or economic (such as the growth of cultural employment or increased tourism). Many researchers within cultural policy studies are critical of such an approach and argue instead that policy should be rationalized in intrinsic terms (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007; Gray, 2002, 2007; Holden, 2004; McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras, & Brooks 2004; Miles, 2007). Intrinsic qualities of the arts are often seen as too nebulous to have tangible policy outcomes, and instead, arts funding advocates effectively borrow from the quantified outcomes of other policy sectors, and seek to attribute some of these to the arts. For example, such advocates borrow the goals of education policy when they argue that the arts promote literacy and social understandings. Governments, policy makers, funding agencies and researchers spend considerable resources looking for proof of the impact of the arts rather than focusing on “trying to understand them” (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007, p. 137).

Recent research has begun to investigate the emotional or cultural impact of the arts on audiences with the aim of identifying the intrinsic dimensions (Baxter & O’Reilly, 2009; McCarthy et al., 2004; Pitts, 2005; Selwood, 2009), although not with a view to using such knowledge to evaluate artistic quality. Holden (2004, p. 18) claimed that “responses to culture are personal and individual”, and Brown and Novak (2007) determined that the quality of an artistic performance resides in the individual audience member’s definition of quality based on their intrinsic experience of a performance. Research with performing arts audiences in Australia clarified how artistic quality can be interpreted through the audience’s experience of engagement in the performance. Following research by Boerner and Rentz (2008) in Europe, Radbourne, Glow,
Johanson and White (2009) found that focus groups with subscribers and audience members who had never attended a performance of a particular company provided very similar responses and descriptions of their experience. They determined that the audience experience was equivalent to expert measurement by critics and peers and worth consideration as a measurement of quality in the performing arts.

Where once audiences were seen as primarily passive (Boorsma, 2006; Wheeler, 2004), now it is acknowledged that the audience contributes to the “co-creation of value” (Lusch & Vargo, cited in Etgar, 2008, p. 108). The new arts consumer “is on a quest for self-actualisation where the creative or cultural experience is expected to fulfil a spiritual need that has little to do with the traditional marketing plan of an arts organisation” (Radbourne, 2007, p. 1). Audiences increasingly want to shape their own experience, and marketing strategies should be re-focused on empowering audiences, not targeting them (Newell, cited in Scheff Bernstein, 2007, p. 252). Other scholars comment that audiences are active participants in the creation of artistic quality, and the arts sector itself must ask “What is the consumption value that practitioners in the cultural sector seek to produce [and] what role does the industry want the spectator to play in forming this value?” (Mencarelli & Pulh, 2006, p. 20). Petkus (2004, p. 54) claims that “Arts patrons who feel that they have had a part in creating future arts experiences are likely to be loyal, dedicated patrons.”

This article is built on the hypothesis that audiences must be involved in the evaluation of the arts and that they are capable of measuring quality. The audience experience is personal, but it is their measurement of quality, and is a significant determinant of repeat attendance. The article traces audience feedback and the impact of the use of this feedback by companies on their decision making. It examines the indicators and attributes of the audience experience to form an Index that is applied as an evaluation tool for measuring the quality of the arts.

**Challenging the traditional measures of arts quality**

Traditionally, arts organizations have used measurements of quality through such means as peer and critical review (Tobias, 2004; Voss & Voss, 2000); attendance and subscriber levels, number of performances, number of new productions, earned-income (Allman, 1994, and Schugk, 1996, both cited in Boerner & Renz, 2008); the reputation of the company, artist, conductor or director; receipt of honours and awards; festival participation and sponsorship and grants. The present paradigm of measurement has been criticized as “evidence-based, target-driven decision-making . . . based on a technocratic world view” (Boerner & Renz, 2008, p. 59). Arts and cultural sector managers generally rely on standard audience satisfaction surveys of data on motivation for and barriers to attendance, sources of information and satisfaction with the programme and booking and seating, for their acquittal reports.

In his speech to the National Press Club, the Honourable Peter Garrett, Commonwealth Minister for Environment Protection, Heritage and the Arts, stated that Australian arts organizations need to “produce work which attracts new audiences by reflecting and responding to evolving audience expectations” (Garrett, 2009). “I believe we are in the midst of a great sea change in the involvement of Australians with the arts.” This “sea change” concerns government arts departments, arts organizations and the audiences they serve. It presents the challenge to find the means to engage audiences in the assessment of the quality of the arts, and thereby contribute directly to the planning, marketing and creative endeavours that are crucial in sustaining and advancing the sector. A recent Australia Council for the Arts report (2009a) argued that the intrinsic benefits of the audience experience are important components of artistic vibrancy, and need to be better understood. The state government arts department in Victoria has responded to this challenge by supporting research into a new tool to measure the audience experience. They anticipate...
that “Quality measures from an audience perspective will be a legitimate and valuable enhancement of the assessment of artistic outcomes currently provided by experts and reviews” (personal communication).

The main researchers driving the change agenda have been commissioned agencies whose investigations with audiences have documented congruent sets of cultural values and intrinsic benefits that audiences seek and experience as part of their participation in the arts. Since 2004, John Holden has proposed a new paradigm of cultural value in the United Kingdom which “challenges policy makers and organizations to adopt a new concordat between funders, funded and the public” (Holden, 2004, p. 60). This paradigm “recognises the affective elements of the cultural experience, practice and identity” (p. 59). McCarthy et al. (2004) published the findings of their research to expand participation in arts and culture. They concluded that instrumental benefits lack rigour and specificity, and that “Those individuals who are most engaged by their arts experience are the ones who are the most attuned to the intrinsic benefits, and those benefits create not only positive attitudes towards the arts, but also motivations to return” (p. 56). These intrinsic benefits are:

- captivation;
- pleasure;
- capacity for empathy;
- cognitive growth;
- social bonds; and
- expression of communal meanings.

The third examination of the audience experience, conducted in the United States in 2006 by Brown and Novak (2007), links the audience experience to an evaluation of quality and repeat attendance. This research tested and demonstrated the utility of real measures of artistic impact on audiences attending a live performance. Brown and Novak suggest “that the results indicate a shift in the traditional role of arts presenters from one of simply marketing and presenting to one of drawing audiences into the experience (i.e. engagement approach)” (p. 21). Their intrinsic impacts were:

- captivation;
- intellectual stimulation;
- emotional resonance;
- spiritual value;
- aesthetic growth; and
- social bonding.

“(F)requent participants are those whose experiences engage them in multiple ways – mentally, emotionally, and socially. The more intense that engagement is, the more gratifying the experience. It is such experiences that make people into life-long participants in the arts” (McCarthy et al., 2004, p. 57). Research in 2007 (Radbourne & Arthurs, 2007) demonstrated that if audience members have a personal experience that meets an individual self-actualization need, they are most likely to re-attend. The United States’ National Endowment for the Arts 2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts identified that audiences for live performances are declining, whereas the experience of the arts through the mass media is increasing. In this context, arts organizations need to better understand their audience’s motivations and experience expectations in order to survive. By positioning the audience experience at the centre of the existing array of measures employed to assess quality, the intrinsic benefits to individuals and
to society of live performing arts events are recognized. As intellectual, emotional and aesthetic meanings arise in the participating audience, the meanings translate to inspiration and empowerment, and to repeat attendances of live performances.

Using the hypothesis that if the arts experience meets a self-actualization need, audiences use their personal attribution of quality and re-attend, a comparative table was developed (Table 1). It shows the traditional metrics used to measure the quality of a performing arts organization and a set of new measures of the audience experience developed in this study, but very similar to the intrinsic impacts and benefits of other researchers. Both sets of measures have outcomes of funding or revenue derived from governments, sponsors, donors or audiences. The inherent question is around sustainability.

Sustainability is an urgent priority for most funders and policy makers as they seek to reduce the dependence of arts organizations on government funding and, at the same time, increase audience participation across the performing arts field. Arts Victoria, like all government arts departments, must communicate the public cultural value of government investment in the arts. Such investment is currently justified (and measured) by a narrow range of set criteria: excellence, identity, reputation and access (State of Victoria, 2008). This department acknowledges the challenge of sustainability to their funded performing arts organizations. They must better engage audiences in the creative process, and they must maintain and improve their audience share in an increasingly competitive, globalized environment. Consequently, Arts Victoria has committed to investing in research, which will lead to traditional assessments of quality in the performing arts being supplemented by a measure of the audience experience.

**The research method**

There were several stages to this study, which are summarized here and described in detail below. It commenced with a determination to understand and document audience experiences of performances they had just attended. The focus group findings were then evaluated against literature and reports on the audience experience, authenticity, quality measures in the arts and the intrinsic benefits of the arts. The outcome of this stage was the acceptance that the audience can provide a legitimate measure of the quality of a performance. Third, primary research was conducted to identify how experiential data was, or could be collected, and could be used to

<table>
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<tr>
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<td>= Quality in the performing arts</td>
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<td>• Number of performances</td>
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<td>• Number of new works</td>
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<td>• Critical acclaim</td>
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<td>• Peer assessment</td>
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<td>• Value of earned income</td>
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<td>Audience experience measures of quality</td>
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<td>• Collective engagement</td>
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measure the quality of the audience experience. This stage provided critical information on “deep feedback”, which serves the need for audience empowerment in the process of measuring quality. Next, and the most important aspect of the research, involved transferring the findings to a quality measurement tool that was deemed credible to the government funding department and to participating organizations. This Arts Audience Experience Index was then developed and tested in two ways, from an audience survey in a performing arts venue and from a “deep feedback” focus group with subscribers at a contemporary theatre company. Both companies were given a report and an Index rating. The study has culminated in acceptance for three-year implementation by Arts Victoria and 11 funded performing arts organizations from 2010 to 2012.

The audience experience
An analysis of the intrinsic benefits of the audience experience, arising from recent literature and reports by leading scholars in the field (Brown & Novak, 2007; McCarthy et al., 2004; Radbourne, 2007) and from a pilot study in Australia, led to the establishment of the four indicators in Table 1: knowledge, risk, authenticity and collective engagement. The pilot study comprised a total of seven focus groups with audience members for five productions of live music or theatre performed by three companies at three venues. This diversity ensured venue, performing art form or company loyalty would not influence any potential data convergence. Two types of focus group were run: groups of company subscribers (hereafter “attenders”) and groups of audience members who had not previously attended a performance at that venue (hereafter “non-attenders”). The aim behind this approach was to reflect the experiences of people who would commonly choose to see such performances and of those for whom it was a new experience, thus allowing familiarity or “expertise” to be analysed against “non-expertise”.

The focus group questions prompted the respondents to reflect on the nature of their experience as audience members and to consider a variety of elements which enhanced or detracted from that experience. Participants were asked to reflect on their responses to the performance, such as when they most felt engaged in the performance, what prompted this engagement, what emotions were elicited and how they expressed this emotion. The responses of both non-attenders and attenders suggested intrinsic benefits which were common to both groups.

(1) Knowledge/learning: respondents asserted the importance of information as a part of the audience experience and its role in providing opportunities to learn;
(2) Quality measures: respondents discussed the importance of an authentic experience that they defined as “quality”;
(3) Risk: respondents recognized a sense of risk as a key marker of their experience performing arts audiences;
(4) “Live-ness”: respondents noted that the experience was qualitatively different to the experience of being an audience for the non-live (recorded) arts, noting in particular the nature of “live-ness” as a shared, communal audience experience.

These key intrinsic benefits were probed more deeply against the research and reports in other countries. This data refined the four indicators of the audience experience, as follows.

Knowledge. This is concerned with providing audiences with information to enable a better understanding of the performance leading to an enriched experience and likely return visitation (Kawashima, 2000, 2006). Knowledge also includes the intellectual stimulation or cognitive traction (Brown & Novak, 2007) created by the performance for that audience. Cognitive growth
occurs when individuals focus attention on a work of art, developing perception and intellectual stimulation to make sense of what they see and hear (McCarthy et al., 2004).

Risk. This is described in four related ways that determine the likelihood of re-consumption for theatre goers: functional risk (the possibility that the product may not “meet the consumer’s expectation”); economic risk (the cost complicates the decision-making process); psychological risk (the product may pose a threat to the consumer’s self-image); and social risk (how the consumer wishes to be perceived by other people) (Colbert, Nantel, Bilodeau, & Rich, 2001). The context, relevance (social and cultural familiarity) and anticipation of the audience member form measurable and manageable “readiness” constructs (Brown & Novak, 2007). Risk management involves enhancing the individual’s “readiness”, sense of anticipation or excitement and perception of positive risk.

Authenticity. This is associated with truth and believability (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Leigh, Peters, & Shelton, 2006). The greater the performance’s authenticity perceived by audience members, the greater their enjoyment of the experience. Authenticity has two main components. One is the authenticity of what is offered (whether the music is faithful to the score), and the second is the audience’s emotional perception. The authors’ pilot study identified both the artistic authenticity of the performance and the audience’s own emotional perception associated with “reality” or “believability” as factors in their experience of quality (Radbourne, Glow, et al., 2009).

Collective engagement. This is an audience’s experience of engagement with performers and other audience members, and the bond or expression of communal meanings that occurs with others before or after the performance (Boorsma, 2006; Brown & Novak, 2007; Jacobs, 2000; McCarthy et al., 2004). The audience’s relationship to the performers, the audience members’ sense of enjoyment shared, and opportunities to discuss the performance with other audience members and staff all heighten the sense of social inclusion and, thus, the perception of quality.

Knowledge, risk, authenticity and collective engagement were confirmed as the indicators that encompass how audiences measure quality. Whereas knowledge, risk and authenticity encompass the participant’s individual engagement with the performance, collective engagement was also revealed as an indicator of quality. When measured together, these indicators form an index of the arts experience that arts organizations can use to build audience engagement and participation, and arts funders or government departments can use to measure that organization’s audience engagement. The pilot research made clear that if audience expectations of knowledge or learning, risk taking, authenticity or quality guarantee, and collective engagement are met, audiences will return to productions offered by that organization. A live performance has the potential to empower audiences in ways that contrast dramatically with the satisfaction audiences experience with mediated distribution such as recordings and film.

The Arts Audience Experience Index is conceived as a qualitative tool to access audience feedback on quality, as formally defined in terms of quality indicators. Most current audience data is collected at the point of purchase or in qualitative focus groups or quantitative surface level surveys. This is the first tool developed to measure the intrinsic experience, similar to well-being and quality of life indexes used to measure liveable cities and community well-being. The Index identifies the priority of each of the following indicators to the audience of each participating organization, and then examines the extent to which the organization maximizes attributes of the indicators (Table 2).

A Likert scale of 1–5 is used for each indicator to facilitate easy transfer of the median results of survey questions. A simple survey distributed to a sample of audience members includes
a bank of eight statements of importance, ranging from “not at all important” to “very important”, and eight statements of agreement that range from “not agree at all” to “agree strongly”. These statements are developed around the attributes of each indicator, customized for the particular arts organization. Two statements in each bank relate to the Experience Indicators. The median result is used for each statement. The statement results are summated and the mean used to determine the Experience Indicator.

The Index is based on the sum of (a) + (b) + (c) + (d) (see Table 2). Each indicator is rated from 1–5 and the total provides the score for the arts organization:

- 4–7 = minimal quality audience experience;
- 8–11 = moderate quality audience experience;
- 12–16 = moderately high quality audience experience;
- 17–20 = high quality audience experience.

Thus, individual indicators (or the total score out of 20) can be used in analysing the organization’s achievements in building their audience experience.

The on-going implementation of the Index requires a method of collecting experience data in the organization. Annual audience surveys are not the most efficient or effective method. They are costly and removed in time from the actual experience of the performance. The challenge, as Brown and Novak (2007) suggest, is to compose a survey that probes the experience and allows audiences to reflect and communicate their responses, their intrinsic values and benefits routinely after each performance. Re-positioning audiences in this way requires new methods for collecting feedback, in order to better understand the specific qualities audiences seek from their experience. Audience feedback has the potential to shape organizational planning decisions relating to the artistic programme, the venue and the provision of information and social opportunities. Although most performing arts organizations recognize the need for good feedback, they do not have strategies to collect it. The value of feedback is a stronger relationship with, and
understanding of, audiences, and a more reliable potential measure of quality that is linked to repeat attendance and sustainability.

**Deep feedback**

In order to evaluate data collection strategies for performing arts organizations interested in the experiences of their audiences, it is necessary to determine how feedback is currently sought from audiences and how it is used. In 2009 interviews were conducted at four selected performing arts companies to assess their audience feedback strategies. The in-depth interviews included four questions:

1. In what ways do you actively seek audience feedback to your organization?
2. What are the key things you have learned about the audience experience from this feedback?
3. How does your organization utilize audience feedback?
4. Is this (process of getting audience feedback) successful, and how do you know?

Question 1 was intended to provide a list of methods the companies use to obtain audience feedback. It was also intended to provide a context for the company’s deliberate relationship with its audience, particularly in seeking knowledge, learning, information and values.

Question 2 was the key question in providing the researchers with information of the company’s interpretation of feedback content around new learning and understanding of their audiences, such as their capacity to take risks or self-manage the risk of attendance and participation, their expectations of a performance, their relationships and reactions to performers and the artistic programme, their social needs in terms of sharing with other audience members and the effect of a live performance, their personal needs against values of believability and self-actualization, and the potential for this audience to describe their experience in terms of quality and repeat attendance.

Questions 3 and 4 were designed to gain an understanding of how the companies accept the feedback and determine to incorporate any findings in programming or packaging future productions. It was important to know if the companies attributed the audience feedback as a potential measure of quality, and had thereby empowered their audiences to contribute to the company’s development. It was deemed that, if companies were using audience feedback, then with appropriate tools, the audience experience could be measured within the proposed Index, and this Index could contribute to management and marketing decision making.

The four performing arts companies were chosen on the basis of participant observation and experience, that each of them uses, and has consistently used over time, identifiable methods of gathering audience feedback. These methods are such that can be described and analysed. Based on these interviews, it was apparent that audience feedback mechanisms within performing arts organizations show a distinction between strategies to elicit “deep feedback” and “surface feedback”. Surface feedback includes the data collected from customer surveys, such as demographic information and audience members’ evaluation of the financial and geographical accessibility of a performance (Radbourne, Johanson & Glow, 2009). These kinds of feedback are standard processes in professional performing arts companies. In contrast, deep feedback refers to methods of gathering data about the audience’s experience that progressively build on the information the audience member provides, and allows participants to direct the feedback to those aspects of their experience they consider worthy of discussion. It uses particular structured measures to elicit candid feedback that audiences otherwise offer spontaneously and informally. Deep feedback is based on qualities the audience associates with a specific company or venue, and
measures the programme or production’s success in achieving these qualities. The use of deep feedback strategies is responsive to evolving knowledge about the role of the audience in a performance. Deep feedback strategies do not ask whether the respondent was satisfied with the company’s programme, nor whether the audience member was satisfied with a specific performance. Rather, deep feedback uses the company’s knowledge about, for example, whether their audiences seek risk from the programme or prefer to have risk minimized to elicit information about how the programme challenged the audience.

The features of deep feedback are comparable to those of reflective or “deep learning” in education theory. Whereas “surface learning” is “associated with uncritical accumulation of facts and opinions” (Bourner, 2003, p. 271), “deep learning” involves “interrogating experience with searching questions” (p. 270). Just as both kinds of learning are necessary for successful education (Watkins & Biggs, 1999, p. 35), both surface feedback (in the form of marketing and demographic surveys) and deep feedback are valuable for the performing arts company: surface feedback provides information about the audience, whereas deep feedback provides information about their expectations and experience of the performance.

Interviews with marketing managers and directors of arts companies indicated that effective deep feedback strategies vary according to each company’s mission and target audience. The feedback strategy chosen should relate to both the qualities the audience members give priority to, and the expressive means they prefer. Measurement of the audience’s sense of authentic experience, collective engagement, risk and knowledge requires feedback that is qualitative and thorough, and that encourages sustained reflection. Methods for soliciting deep feedback vary from one company to another, depending on the target audience, company mission, and the status of each of the four quality indicators in relation to this mission. However, a customized deep feedback system will invite audience members to respond to searching and cumulative questions. The company’s commitment to gathering and using this information will empower audiences to express the quality of their experience. The consequence is that there is a wide range of examples of the way a deep feedback strategy might work. Deep feedback strategies include:

- a blog in which discussion topics are posed by the company to prompt audience members to share their prior knowledge of a production, and their experience of the performance. Online opportunities such as blogging are useful for this purpose because they can facilitate dialogue between audience members over a relatively long time-frame (such as over the week following a performance);
- semi-structured phone interviews with a small number of audience members. This strategy has the advantage of capturing audiences who may be time-poor and disinclined to linger after a performance, but it has the disadvantage that – unlike a blog – it cannot encourage dialogue between audience member participants;
- a focus group or selective social gathering in which a member of the company’s staff uses prompts to encourage small-group discussion. This strategy is particularly appropriate when the company’s target audience shows a predisposition towards making their attendance a social event;
- a game-blog, in which audiences of a children’s theatre company reveal the background knowledge they had of a performance by participating in the game established in a blog. Their online discussion indicates both their knowledge and what they found memorable and thought-provoking about the performance. Such data are then used to assess the type and quality of information the company had provided, thereby indicating the company’s level of success in heightening the audience’s knowledge;
- an annual dinner meeting with the company’s dramaturge for selected audience members who are asked to discuss how the company’s programme reflected contemporary political
and social themes, thereby indicating the company’s level of success in achieving authenticity. The target audience of this company is highly educated and informed on current affairs;

- a formal committee of audience members selected for their capacity to provide individual “expert” written feedback on each performance, and annual collective feedback to the company director, manager and marketing manager;
- a theatre club or music society who attend a particular performance in the season and formally meet post-performance to discuss the performance in the presence of the marketing manager or other company personnel.

Conventional marketing discourse uses the notion of service quality as a tool for measuring levels of satisfaction (Conchar, Zinkhan, Peters, & Olavarrieta, 2004; Grayson & Martinec, 2004) but it does not measure audience experience (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Kotler & Scheff, 1997; Radbourne, 2007; Ragsdale, 2008). The use of deep feedback strategies to identify the attributes of the performing arts experience that the audience seeks is a logical step in acknowledging the new role of the audience as co-producer and investor in the performing arts company. Deep feedback strategies may be used in conjunction with data on audience attendance, to examine the reasons behind attendance trends.

Once initial deep feedback has been collected and analysed, it may be used to form the basis of the Arts Audience Experience Index, discussed previously. Deep feedback also has the potential to evaluate the company’s decision making in relation to changing audience priorities.

Testing the Arts Audience Experience Index

The Arts Audience Experience Index was tested with two companies using two methods customized to the mission and immediate “positioning” need of the company. The first involved conducting a focus group with 10 subscribers of a contemporary theatre company to establish the priority that audience members give to each of the four indicators. The second case study involved a short survey questionnaire with an appropriate audience sample of a performing arts venue, which further tested responses through a bank of importance and agreement statements on the attributes of each indicator. It was not considered necessary to survey or include focus groups of non-attenders, because the early set of focus groups had established that the four indicators were common to attenders and non-attenders, and the test for the Index was rather to assess the extent to which the companies met their audiences’ expectations in relation to the indicators. Both followed interviews with the director or manager of the company. Interviews with the staff members informed the research team on how audience data are currently collected and used, and the organization’s capacity for introducing audience feedback mechanisms based on the Index. The survey responses were analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) and provided an audience experience rating for each indicator and of the company.

Case study 1

The first case study sought to gain deep feedback and probe the particular intrinsic values or benefits audiences seek to experience when attending a performance of that company. It represented a mid-point between identifying the indicators of quality and assessing a company’s success in reflecting those indicators through the use of a survey. To that end a focus group was held with nine audience members of a contemporary theatre company immediately following a performance to establish the priority given to each indicator. The company wanted data to contribute strategically to their audience development. They perform main-house productions in their own city-fringe 79-seat theatre. The company works as an ensemble and is managed and staffed
by the actors. Casts are small (two or three actors). Plays are cutting edge, contemporary text-based plays or adaptations. The company has a growing festival interest and the ensemble is in demand by directors looking for an alternative company to test new ideas with a talented group of actors.

The focus group participants were volunteers recruited by the company from their subscriber list and included two couples and other individuals who were not known to any other focus group participants. The questions were based on attributes of the four arts audience experience indicators. Participants were articulate and gave valuable qualitative feedback on the Arts Audience Experience Index (AAEI) of that company.

In terms of knowledge, this audience does not necessarily seek prior knowledge on the show, because they have an understanding of the ensemble, the actors, the types of productions and have already made the decision to subscribe or attend based on that knowledge and expectation. Other audiences often benefit from pre-show or programme information. This audience attends because they want to be emotionally and intellectually challenged. They want to learn more about themselves and society from attendance. They certainly want the learning these productions provide but they do not need information to prepare them. They have that intrinsically.

I know nothing about this production. I hadn’t read a review [before coming]. Well I often don’t read reviews when I am going to a performance. There would have been no reason for me not to come because I go to them all. I wasn’t searching out anything about the play.

[y]ou kind of come with that open mind of I am here to experience something and enjoy what they put in front of me and take away what I can. I think that is part of the expectation, that you come just open to [the idea] that it is going to be a good experience.

I think many of the topics of the play are topics which afterwards you do consider and reflect on them in your own life or in someone else’s. You don’t always need to do that but sometimes you do because of the topics that are chosen.

[y]ou never go home and forget it.

These audience members were happy to attend with friends or alone. They do not need to come with others because their collective engagement is derived from the intimacy of the venue and the fact that they expect those who attend are similar to themselves and will all experience the performance as one. They believe that the audience is sharing the same emotional and intellectual experience whether they attended solo or with a group.

probably what I liked was it doesn’t matter who I am sitting next to in that environment, so it is something that I can either come to by myself or I can sit with people I know. So that is also a nice thing . . . and I am someone that usually likes to go to things with people. Whereas the (company) environment allows you to quite happily attend because it is such an intimate experience, you are very much in your own space and your own world while you are watching the performance. So it doesn’t actually matter whether you are sitting with people or by yourself while you are there.

Respondents clearly stated that they seek risk. This is why they attend performances by this company. They self-identify with the company’s selection of productions. They want to take emotional risks. They want to be challenged. They expect to have to take a personal risk in attending a performance.

The content won’t shock me but it might very well shock some other people but it is not that I am shock-proof.
I haven’t had a chance to talk about it with anyone yet but I would like to talk about it because there were lots of things that I am not terribly sure about. Not that I want everything made totally clear but I have not talked with anyone about it yet.

They also expect quality. Their search for authenticity is about quality. They know that the acting will be memorable and the direction and design will deliver on their expectations. Authenticity is also associated with the intimacy of the venue. They would not attend if the venue was larger or if the quality diminished. In response to a question regarding expectations of the performance, participants answered:

[a]lways quality performers of the (company) and always to be entertained and to be challenged.

[i]t is the quality of the writing in the plays that they produce; generally is very good and the quality of the acting.

I agree that the quality of the plays and the acting are important and what is remarkable about [the company] is that you are not as conscious of how style and actors repeating their performances as you have been in the past with other reputable companies.

I have been coming to [this company] since they started. I am always quite excited about coming because they are usually new plays, quite often Australian premieres. I always feel it is going to be something that I have not seen before and something that I am going to have to think about. I really like the idea that it is a small ensemble and I do … I feel I get to know a lot of the actors and I really enjoy that.

The findings indicate a high rating for capacity to take risk and need for authenticity, and a low rating for need for pre-show knowledge and purposeful collective engagement. A survey for a wider audience group would need to present statements of importance on audience sharing, and personal learning, to test focus group views on the attributes of knowledge and collective engagement. The implications of this is that if the company wishes to grow its audiences then they may have to develop a second company or programme that tours or performs for a different (festival, arts centre) audience while maintaining the subscription audience and their intrinsic benefits derived at the current venue. Audiences want to be able to talk to others about their experiences and interpretation after the show. This could be immediately afterwards in the foyer over coffee, or a drop-in coffee club on a weekday morning. This will complete their experience. Subscribers would most likely want to be asked their preference for this post-show discussion. Peer reflection can be quite empowering. Such a tactic will most likely increase the company’s understandings for developing new audiences.

Case study 2

This case study involved a regional performing arts centre that programmes its subscription season around the two drivers of product availability and audience preference. A context setting in-depth interview with the centre manager, prior to delivery of the survey, described the audience as fairly conservative but loyal, and frequent in their feedback through phone calls, emails and active membership of the Theatre Club. Each season included a variety of performances – theatre, dance, music, opera and other live performing arts such as circus. In addition, the artistic policy was such that one show in the season presented a “risk” to audiences, as a means to develop the audiences in that region. This interview removed the need for factor loading as the survey questions were customized for this company and audience. The face to face survey questionnaire was used with 25 audience members, most of whom were members of the Theatre Club. This guaranteed a number of respondents and was designed to seek feedback.
from those who considered themselves as an “expert audience”. The survey included an initial open-ended question seeking the expectations of the audience members, very similar to the first question for focus group members. These responses showed an expectation of entertainment, fast-moving dialogue, a well written and performed show of high quality. There were some demographic questions (age group, occupation, gender and level of education) and an initial bank of eight statements against which respondents rated their level of agreement. This first bank of questions was not composed to reflect the experience indicators but provided a further context of each respondent for later correlation. The statements sought information on frequency of attendance, product preference, expectations of the performance and mode of attendance (alone or with others). The play was a modern comedy around social issues by David Williamson.

The median response to “I really like this type of entertainment” was 5. This and other statements on liking the work of this playwright and this company, wanting to go more often, looking forward to this performance, and attending with friends and those who are interested in this work, set a high expectation of the performance for these audience members.

The most important questions in the survey were developed from the dimensions of the Arts Audience Experience Indicators. Respondents were asked to rate the importance (1–5) of eight statements and strength of agreement (1–5) with eight statements. The median was calculated from each response (1–5) and the mean or these four medians for each indicator. Table 3 shows each statement and the relevant indicator. There are four statements related to each experience indicator. Each statement covers an attribute of that indicator, thus providing a relatively complex input into the audience’s experience.

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of the first group of statements to their experience at performing arts events in general, where 1 = “not at all important” and 5 = “very important”. The median result is shown in the third column of Table 4, and the percentage of respondents rating the experience as very important in the final column. The most important aspect of attendance or participation in a performance for these audience members is the quality of the performers and programme notes. It is not important that they have previous knowledge of this work or that it is part of a festival, but they do want to talk about the performance with others after the show. The second group of statements required respondents to rate their agreement with the following statements, where 1 = “not agree at all” and 5 = “agree strongly”. Strongest agreement was for statements about the performers’ communication with the audience and being challenged by at least one show in the season. Strongest agreement was for statements about the performers’ communication with the audience and being challenged by at least one show in the season.

Table 3. Survey Question 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>Percentage rated agree strongly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) I attend as many events at this venue as possible.</td>
<td>4 (n = 2)</td>
<td>35.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) I really like the work of this particular playwright/composer.</td>
<td>4 (n = 22)</td>
<td>45.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) I really like the work of this particular company/orchestra/band.</td>
<td>4 (n = 21)</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) I really like this type of entertainment (theatre, live music etc.).</td>
<td>5 (n = 24)</td>
<td>62.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e) I would like to go to this type of entertainment more often.</td>
<td>4 (n = 23)</td>
<td>47.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(f) I have been looking forward to coming to this performance.</td>
<td>4 (n = 24)</td>
<td>41.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(g) I have been looking forward to watching this performance in the company of friends and/or family.</td>
<td>4 (n = 24)</td>
<td>41.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(h) I have been looking forward to watching this performance in the company of other people who are interested in the work.</td>
<td>4 (n = 23)</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Excludes respondents who were not part of the Theatre Club, or who did not respond.
The findings allowed researchers to calculate the regional performing arts centre’s AAEI. The results are a mean of 3.75 for Knowledge, 3.75 for Risk, 4.5 for Authenticity and 4.375 for Collective Engagement. The audience therefore showed the highest value for authenticity, that is, believable and sincere performances and engagement with the performers. Their second highest value or intrinsic benefit was collective engagement; that is, sharing their experience with other audience members during or after the show. They showed a lower value for knowledge and risk, revealing an expectation that the organization would provide the information needed to understand the performance and that the production would be what they preferred and at an acceptable cost, neither requiring personal research or personal risk. The overall score of 16.4 shows this performing arts centre as achieving a moderately high quality audience experience, but not at the highest quality.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 1: Statement of importance</th>
<th>Related AAEI indicator</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>Percentage rated very important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Notes about the performance and the work are included in the programme.</td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>5 (n = 24)</td>
<td>58.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The arts centre presents my preferred type of shows.</td>
<td>Risk</td>
<td>4 (n = 25)</td>
<td>24.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The performance matches expectations from the promotional description.</td>
<td>Authenticity</td>
<td>4 (n = 25)</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other members of the audience have a similar response to the performance as I do.</td>
<td>Collective engagement</td>
<td>4 (n = 25)</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The actors, dancers, singers or musicians show technical skill and understanding of the work.</td>
<td>Authenticity</td>
<td>5 (n = 25)</td>
<td>60.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have previously seen or heard this work (production), or accessed a preview on the Web.</td>
<td>Risk</td>
<td>2 (n = 23)</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The performance or production is part of a festival, or a series or a theme.</td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>2 (n = 22)</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience members have the opportunity to discuss the performance with others sometime after the</td>
<td>Collective engagement</td>
<td>5 (n = 25)</td>
<td>52.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>show.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 2: Statements of agreement</th>
<th>Related AAEI indicator</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>Percentage strong agreement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The cost of attendance (ticket, transport, parking, personal) equates with the quality of the performance.</td>
<td>Risk</td>
<td>4 (n = 20)</td>
<td>40.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The reputation of the performers is matched by the quality of the performance.</td>
<td>Authenticity</td>
<td>4 (n = 24)</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-show and after-show talks increase my understanding of the performance.</td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>4 (n = 23)</td>
<td>39.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My enjoyment or appreciation is increased when I understand the meaning of the production.</td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>4 (n = 23)</td>
<td>45.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The best performers are those who seem to communicate directly with their audience.</td>
<td>Authenticity</td>
<td>5 (n = 24)</td>
<td>54.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Established rules of audience behaviour (e.g., when to applaud, not speaking during the performance, overt expressions of laughter or boredom) influence my individual experience.</td>
<td>Collective engagement</td>
<td>4 (n = 24)</td>
<td>37.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like being challenged by at least one of the shows in the season.</td>
<td>Risk</td>
<td>5 (n = 24)</td>
<td>58.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live performing arts, that is, real people performing in real time, require me to provide real interaction.</td>
<td>Collective engagement</td>
<td>4.5 (n = 24)</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The findings allowed researchers to calculate the regional performing arts centre’s AAEI. The results are a mean of 3.75 for Knowledge, 3.75 for Risk, 4.5 for Authenticity and 4.375 for Collective Engagement. The audience therefore showed the highest value for authenticity, that is, believable and sincere performances and engagement with the performers. Their second highest value or intrinsic benefit was collective engagement; that is, sharing their experience with other audience members during or after the show. They showed a lower value for knowledge and risk, revealing an expectation that the organization would provide the information needed to understand the performance and that the production would be what they preferred and at an acceptable cost, neither requiring personal research or personal risk. The overall score of 16.4 shows this performing arts centre as achieving a moderately high quality audience experience, but not at the highest quality.
There was no significant correlation between age, gender and education differences and the respondents’ ratings of agreement or importance of statements in the survey. There was a positive correlation between responses that agreed strongly with “I really like this type of entertainment” and responses that agreed with the statement “The actors, dancers, singers or musicians show technical skill and understanding of their work”, showing that these audience members experienced authenticity. This correlation would need to be further tested with a larger sample.

These two case studies represent a transition in research techniques based on developing knowledge of the audiences for participating organizations from an initial focus group to a short survey questionnaire to establish and customize the Arts Audience Experience Index for each organization. These two deep feedback mechanisms are designed to provide the organizations with tools to solicit and use data on the audience experience to shape audience development strategies and in reporting to funding agencies. The feedback from the Index can then be compared with the other standard demographic data gathered by the company (age, income, education, mode of attendance, product preference, and service satisfaction).

Conclusion

In 2004, McCarthy et al. concluded that the current policy approach in the arts gives insufficient emphasis to intrinsic benefits, and that arts advocates are “reluctant to emphasize the intrinsic aspects of the arts experience lest such arguments fail to resonate with funders” (p. 68). This article has indicated that policy makers are aware of the need to develop an understanding of the intrinsic benefits of the performing arts to audiences, and has described the set of tools the research team developed in order to collect and assess data to this end.

The study benefits arts funding agencies and cultural policy makers through a new understanding of how to quantify previous qualitative audience data as an effective measure of quality in the performing arts sector resulting in audience development and increased access to, and participation in, the arts. The new Index described in this article is to be used to assess the performance of performing arts organizations supported by Arts Victoria, to evaluate the outcomes of their funding programmes, and to demonstrate the public benefit of arts expenditure. Arts Victoria has actively participated in the research project because they are “interested in finding innovative ways to evaluate the quality of the outcomes of the programmes and organisations we support ... [and] in assisting us in our core business of developing and improving the appreciation of the arts, and of increasing accessibility of the arts to the public” (Research Manager, Arts Victoria, personal communication, August 4, 2009).

For policy making and funding organizations, use of the data collected by the Index will assist strategic planning to develop policies that not only prioritize certain parts of the performing arts sector, or that meet the needs of demographically defined audiences, but also to prioritize policy goals on the basis of the identified affective engagement that companies achieve with their audience.

The research benefits the cultural sector by demonstrating to audiences the capacity of cultural products and practices to provide quality audience experiences. This is of critical importance for the live performing arts sector in particular, as it competes for audiences with the mediated productions of digital technologies. Arts organizations will learn new ways to measure the intrinsic value of the arts experience, thereby improving their capacity to demonstrate returns on government investment.

The Australian community and audiences have benefited from the research through the increased understanding by policy makers and arts managers of the role of the arts in engaging audiences, not as passive consumers of culture, but as active co-creators. The more engaged audiences are, the more likely they are to increase their participation and, thereby, enhance the sustainability of arts organizations.
In particular, the study responds to calls from within the cultural policy and arts management disciplines to develop an understanding of the intrinsic benefits of the arts to audiences, and provides the means of quantifying them. It advances arts management research by proposing ways in which such knowledge can be used to review and advance audience development strategies. It contributes to arguments within cultural policy research by proposing how such knowledge can be used to reform quality measurement and reporting requirements.

References


