

My Essential Reads: Value(s) in cultural participation

by Dr Leila Jancovich

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Background

My essential reads have been chosen to help you think about what participation means to you and to others you engage with, so that we all might think about cultural value, not in the singular but in terms of the different values we bring to culture.

I worked in arts and culture before entering academia and always had an interest in who participated, both as professionals and as participants. But I became aware how the sense of community and belonging that I and colleagues shared was exclusionary for others.

Despite our shared belief in the value culture had to our lives we often failed to consider what other activities might have equal value in other people's lives. I became an academic to reflect on why, despite participation having been a priority for so many of us, for so long, nothing much had changed. With this came an interest in how the different meanings people give to "participation" affects the approaches taken.

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My Essential Reads

1. [Understanding participation: a literature review](#)
by Ellie Brodie, Eddie Cowling, Nina Nissen with Angela Ellis Paine, Véronique Jochum, Diane Warburton (2009)

This literature review is an essential read for anyone who wants to understand how the value of participation, in the political and policy realms, compares to the way it is articulated in culture.

It outlines the context for the growing interest in participation at a policy level, which may equally be driven by the threat of declining interest from the public or the recognition of the right to a voice for different publics. It also identifies different meanings of participation: from public participation, defined as relationships between people and institutions; through individual participation, defined as lifestyle or consumer choice; to social participation; defined by everyday interactions in a range of different activities.

Most importantly this resource offers a route map to participation as process (the activities) against participation as outcome (the goal). I'd recommend anyone in the cultural sector examines the relationship between the value and values they place on participation, the processes employed to increase participation and the goal they hope to achieve through this process.

2. [From Access to Participation: Cultural policy and civil renewal](#) by Emily Keaney (2006)

Emily Keaney outlines the inequalities in who participates in our cultural institutions, but also broadens this to examine participation in other forms of civic life.

She demonstrates that the assumption that people are not already participating in all sorts of civic activities is flawed. She argues for a shift away from the long-standing approach of granting access to established cultural institutions, for example through free museum entry, discounted tickets, and education and outreach programmes. Instead she explores the value culture can and should have in community development and civic life, by applying “the right tools to the right job”.

This is essential reading for anyone considering the value of culture when it operates within wider civic society, rather than autonomously.

3. [The Art of Relevance](#) by Nina Simon (2016)

Many of you will know Nina Simon’s work [The Participatory Museum](#), which has been highly influential in how cultural institutions think about embedding participation for organisational change.

In this more recent book (available to read online) Nina challenges our tendency to measure the value of culture through the transformational experiences of the lucky few individuals who manage to access our spaces. Instead she asks what institutions can do to transform themselves by becoming relevant to the many.

What is particularly interesting is how she talks about “relevance” reinforcing exclusion when projects just reflect the community’s lives and stories back at them. Instead participation can be used to create space for difficult conversations, with people you would not normally engage with, to “unlock meaning and value for diverse people in your community”.

It is her attention to difference and dissenting voices, rather than seeing participation as a process of inclusion and consensus that makes this an essential read.

4. [Developing a Foundation for Quality Guidance for arts organisations and artists in Scotland working in participatory settings](#) by Rachel Blanche (2014)

This report offers a framework to assess quality in participatory art, which is useful to both practitioners and funders. But what makes it an essential read is the synthesis of existing research both within and beyond the cultural sector on quality measurement.

I particularly like the distinction it draws between notions of “quality” as a value judgement and notions of “qualities” as descriptive features of the many dimensions of an activity.

This opens up the possibility of recognising that value may exist in different realms and for different stakeholders. The recommendation from the British Chartered Quality Institute is useful in this regard as they argue that quality should be defined by the recipient (i.e. the public) and not the producer, which is at odds with how so many of us do evaluation.

For me, while it still struggles to address value-laden terms such as “excellence” and “authenticity”, I support its calls for more focus on continuous learning and improvement than measurement, which is central to my own research.

5. [Participatory budgeting and the arts](#) by Emily Fennell and Karin Gavelin with Ruth Jackson (2009)

My next piece responds to the call to put the public at the heart of understanding cultural value. A “duty to involve” the public in decision making has developed across the public sector. This report was commissioned by Arts Council England to explore the implications of this for them and the organisations they fund.

The report demonstrates how participatory decision making is used in other fields as varied as local government, the health service and science. It also explores why there was then, and I would argue is still now, resistance to it as an approach within cultural policy and cultural institutions. The authors are unapologetic about accusing the cultural sector of arrogance: “the notion that arts decision making is too intricate for the average citizen to engage with does not hold up and can come across as elitist and even slightly reactionary”.

It throws open a real challenge to the cultural sector and to any exploration of cultural value about who participates in decisions about what culture we value.

6. [Understanding Everyday Participation – Articulating Cultural Values:](#)

a literature review by Belfiore, E., Bunting, C. Gibson, L. Gilmore, A. Grace, F. Miles, A. Milling, J. Stannage, S. Schaefer, K. (2011)

My recommendations start with a literature review and end with another. This piece provides a list of the many other writers and thinkers who I have not been able to include in my selection, either because the texts were not freely available to access or for brevity.

The review provides brief summaries of the key texts that have influenced cultural policy and our understanding of cultural value and cultural participation. From Matthew Arnold, whose fear of the uncultured masses has influenced cultural education and the idea of participation as betterment, to Pierre Bourdieu, whose seminal work on the relationship between class and taste is crucial to any understanding of the nature of inequalities in the cultural sector. The list introduces an array of essential reading to help understand how participation may be used to perpetuate inequality as easily as to reduce it.

This review was compiled by the team who conducted the larger research project of the same title, the outputs from which I cannot recommend highly enough.

Summary

What really interests me, as someone who has been researching cultural participation for over 10 years, is not the preoccupation with examining the barriers to participation for individuals, built on an assumption that they are in need of cultural improvement, but that we look at ourselves in the cultural sector to think how we might need to improve.

My current research with [David Stevenson from Queen Margaret University](#) aims to challenge our current mode of evaluation, which focuses on monitoring (as a legal requirement) and advocacy, to make the case for more funding, rather than the learning that should be at its heart. Our research aims to reframe evaluation as a more honest acknowledgement of success and failure and contingent on whose perspective we are looking from. Details of this research can be found on our website at www.culturalparticipation.co.uk

Biography

[Dr Leila Jancovich](#) is Associate Professor in Cultural Policy and Participation in the School of Performance and Cultural Industries, University of Leeds.

She originally worked in the cultural sector. She ran Bhatena-Jancovich consultancy for many years, before being programme manager for the Commonwealth Games cultural programme in Manchester in 2002 followed by a period working at Arts Council England.



She started working in academia in 2007 where she currently leads the masters programme in [Audiences, Engagement and Participation](#) and the [Centre for Cultural Policy](#) at the University of Leeds. She has written extensively on the topic of cultural participation. Her own work is available on line for download [here](#) or for those papers that you cannot access you can contact her for more information. You can also follow her work at [#leilajancovich](#) www.culturalparticipation.co.uk

Call to action...

What's the most useful reading you've done in this topic area? What did you learn? If you'd like to share your reflections and learning with us get in touch at ccv@leeds.ac.uk and we'll feed this into a future resource. Or let us know if you'd like to submit a case study or contribute to a podcast or webinar on this theme.

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