Evaluation Principles

CENTRE FOR **CULTURAL VALUE**

Contents

Introduction

In 2021, the Centre for Cutural Value responded to growing demand within the arts, culture and heritage sector for support with evaluation. The result was our co-created Evaluation Principles.

The Principles are not designed as a step-by-step guide to evaluation. With inevitable limits in time and resources, it will never be possible to evenly apply all of the Principles all of the time.

Instead, the Principles are meant to help ground and guide your evaluation practice, supporting you and your stakeholders to set priorities, engage the right people and use appropriate methods to understand the holistic impact of your work.

Evaluation Principles

Connected

Transparent

Aware

Shared

Beneficial

Committed to learning

Ethical

Applicable

People-centred
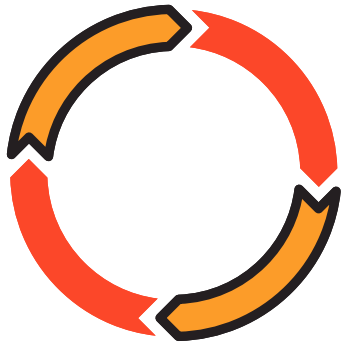
Empathetic

Many-voiced
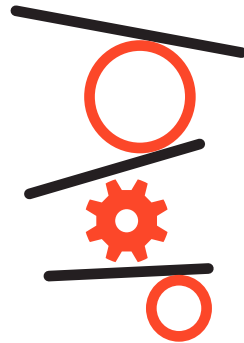
Socially-engaged

Robust

Rigorous

Open-minded

Proportionate

Evaluation Principles in detail

Beneficial

How do we make sure our evaluation addresses our own needs and those of our stakeholders?
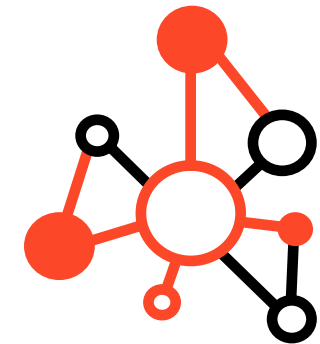
Robust

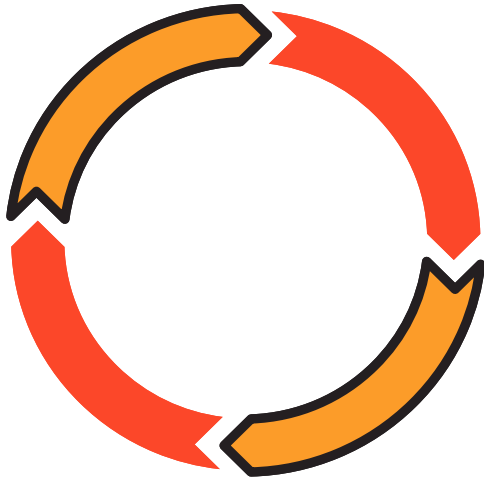Are our evaluation approaches and methods appropriate, rigorous and geared towards learning?

People-centered

How do we consider a diversity of viewpoints and experiences in order to gain better insights?

Connected

Does our evaluation enable learning with and through one another in a shared and effective way?

Beneficial

Committed to learning -   Ethical -   Applicable

The aims of our evaluations are often influenced by the priorities of our funders, rather than addressing the needs of organisations and – importantly – the needs of our audiences, visitors and the wider public.

For our evaluation activity to be beneficial, it needs to centre the experiences, wants, values and viewpoints of the people who are at the heart of the activity.

We can do this by privileging meaningful learning and reflection, developing ethical processes and aiming for positive and actionable change over empty justification and advocacy.
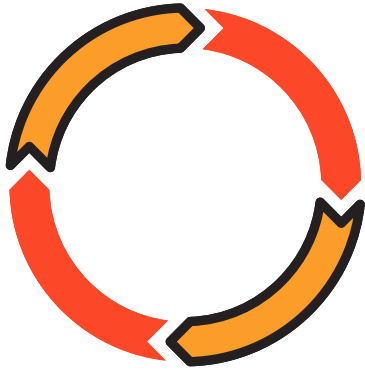
Principles into practice: questions to consider

Is your evaluation activity ... committed to learning?

- What do you want to learn through your evaluations that you don't already know?

- In what ways do you incorporate previous learning, existing data and research into your evaluations?

- Do you start your evaluations early enough to capture baseline data so you can make meaningful comparisons?

- Do your evaluations allow you to challenge the projects' and activities' purpose?

- Do you use qualitative approaches (alongside collecting quantitative data) to help you explore why and how things happen, as much as what?

- Can you use iterative approaches, sharing and discussing provisional results and outcomes with teams as you go?

- Can you negotiate with stakeholders (e.g. funders) for a longer-term follow-up to capture impacts and engagement after the project has ended?
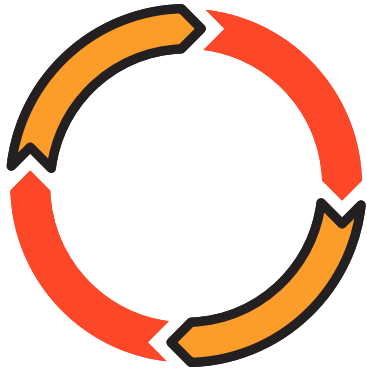
Principles into practice: questions to consider

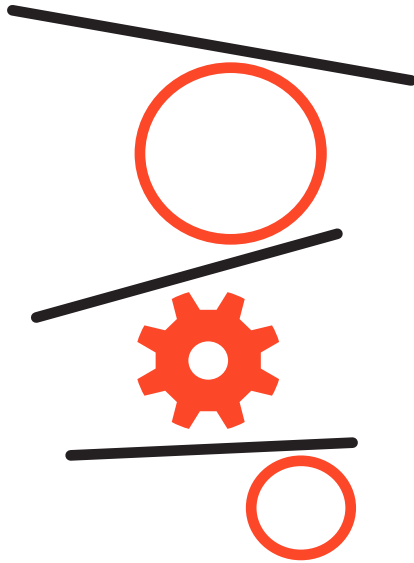**Is your evaluation activity ... applicable?**

- What difference does your evaluation activity have the potential to make? If it won't make a difference, is it worth undertaking?

- How might your evaluation activity be useful for and shared with all your stakeholders? How can this include participants and also those working in other sectors?

- Is the format, length, content and frequency of your communications around your evaluation activity and findings tailored to different audiences?

- Are recommendations developed with those who need to action them, to ensure they are feasible and informed by existing and future plans and processes?
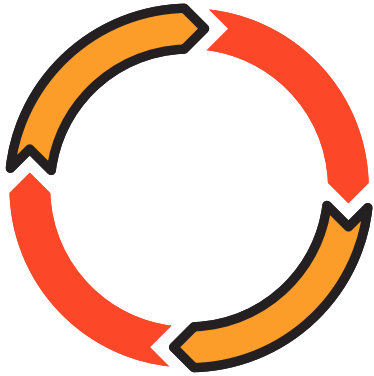
Principles into practice: questions to consider

Is your evaluation activity … ethical?

- What does ethical evaluation look and feel like to you? What does it mean to you to deliver evaluation activity with integrity?

- Does your evaluation activity take advantage of or exploit those that are taking part? Is it appropriate and possible to pay participants for their time and input?

- Does your evaluation activity allow participants to define the change and learning they want to see?

- Can you first test your evaluation methods and design to understand participants' experiences of the evaluation activity?

- Where possible, do you share your evaluation findings with those who have taken part? Is this clearly communicated from the start?

Robust

Rigorous - Open-minded - Proportionate

In order to inform genuine change within the cultural sector, we need to be confident enough in the findings of our evaluation activity and approach.

Part of the skill of conducting robust evaluations involves balancing expertise and skill with openness to unexpected outcomes or viewpoints.

Taking a robust approach to evaluation involves the appropriate and rigorous application of different methods, to not just find out 'what' happened, but understand in more depth 'why' and 'how'. This approach can help us learn from our failures along the way.
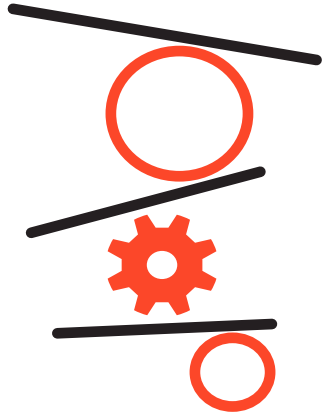
Principles into practice: questions to consider

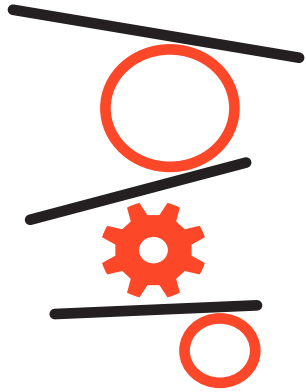**Is your evaluation activity … rigorous?**

- Are you confident about what the available evidence does – and does not – allow you to say?

- How is your evaluation activity grounded in empirical research (i.e. not all theoretical but grounded in experience, observation and practice)?

- How do you decide which methods are most appropriate for evaluating different projects or programmes?

- Do you clearly describe your methods so that they might be replicated? (This might include how focus group participants were selected, how many survey responses you collected or how you coded or filtered your data.)

- Could you explore mixing methods in your evaluation activity to enrich your understanding (e.g. combining qualitative and quantitative research approaches)?

- Does your evaluation activity consider different types of data (i.e. not all numbers or opinions/anecdotes)?
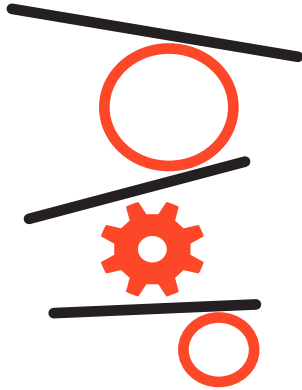
Principles into practice: questions to consider

## Is your evaluation activity ... open-minded?

- What changes can you make to your evaluation activity to incorporate unintended outcomes and new viewpoints? Where are the underrepresented narratives of value in your work?

- How might you make room in your evaluation activity to learn from your failures as much as communicating and celebrating your successes?

- How does your evaluation activity allow you to learn from others and critically engage with your own assumptions?

- Do you make an effort to listen to evidence that might contradict your beliefs and/or lived experience?

- Are there ways you can make it easier to hear and act on critical feedback, without being defensive or dismissive?

- How could your evaluation be carried out with more independence, regardless of outcome?

- Is your evaluation activity too focused on prescriptive, tried-and-tested methods? What is stopping you from trying something innovative, which might open up a new way of learning or working?

- Do you need additional training to help you refresh your knowledge of evaluation methods and techniques and best practice?

Principles into practice: questions to consider

Is your evaluation activity ... proportionate?

- Does your evaluation activity provide you with a good return on your investment (e.g. of time and money), achieving its original aims? If not, why not?

- Do you need to evaluate all of your work? What evaluation activity provides you with the greatest potential learning?

- Have you done this evaluation before? Are there ways in which you could take a more pragmatic approach, such as reducing the scale or scope?

- Are there others who are interested in the same questions with whom you could collaborate and share resource?

- Can you access additional funding for external evaluation support?

- If your evaluation activity is designed to meet certain funding criteria, can you discuss with your funders what might be most useful, in terms of types of information and format of reporting? Can you ask them to provide examples of the type or level of evaluation for different funding amounts?
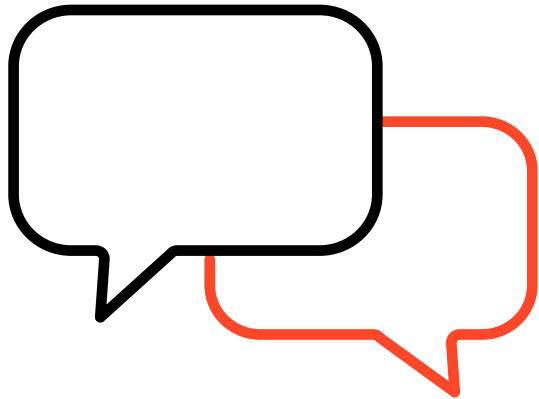
People-centered

Empathetic – Many-voiced – Socially engaged

We know that the cultural sector is often unrepresentative and exclusive, and our evaluations can sometimes serve to conceal, excuse and perpetuate these inequalities and inequities.

As evaluating cultural activity often involves differing, evolving and even contested types of value, considering the range and diversity of viewpoints and experiences enables us to gain better insights.

Making sure our evaluations are many-voiced, empathetic and socially-engaged can equip us with a crucial means to witness, challenge and address problems of representation, inclusion, inequality and inequity within the cultural sector.
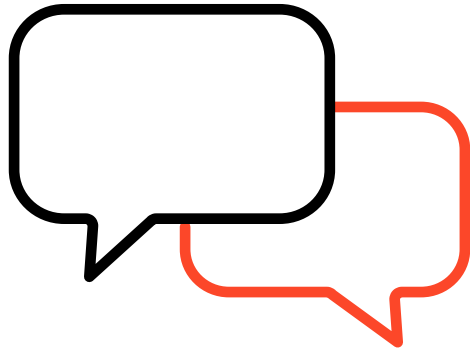
Principles into practice: questions to consider

Is your evaluation activity ... empathetic?

- Do you ask participants about what is important to them? Bear in mind, this might be different from the intended project impact.

- How can your evaluation embrace and work across different lived experiences, respecting (and if possible enhancing) the autonomy, dignity and agency of participants and beneficiaries?

- How can you ensure that evaluation does not diminish or disrupt participant experience? Could creative evaluation methodologies.

- Is your evaluation inclusive and representative of those groups and communities you work with?

- Could your evaluation activity be causing people harm? This might include unchecked assumptions, prejudices, and microaggressions, asking for inappropriate levels of information, not managing expectations of participants, not being clear from the outset about what participation involves.

- Do you provide alternative ways to engage in your evaluation activity, so people can choose how to participate? Is it possible to meet people "where they are"?
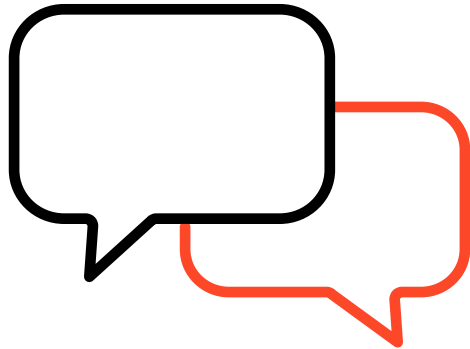
Principles into practice: questions to consider

**Is your evaluation activity ... many-voiced?**

- Who are the dominant voices? How does this inform what you treat as valuable and worthy of including?

- How can your evaluation activity seek out, listen to and include a broader range of voices and perspectives, from design through to sharing of learnings and outcomes?

- Does your evaluation activity take a falsely unifying authorial stance (e.g. reinforcing a viewpoint or opinion as unanimous, when in fact it was only expressed by some people)?

- Do you treat responses in your evaluation activity that you might consider incorrect, irrelevant or inconvenient as valid, even when you might disagree?

- Do you give additional consideration to responses that are outliers, rather than simply excluding them as "exceptions"? Are there clues within their responses to perspectives you may otherwise have missed?

- Can your reporting use people's own words and make source data available?

Principles into practice: questions to consider

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Is your evaluation activity ... socially-engaged?

- Is it possible for your evaluation activity (i.e. purpose, methods and interpretation) to be co-created with representatives of participant or beneficiary groups?

- Does your evaluation activity enable those belonging to marginalised groups to participate fully? How do you ensure their contributions are not restricted to only being in relation to their membership of that group?

- Do you seek out direct responses in preference to people "representing" others' views?

- Does your evaluation feed into your future strategy and that of your stakeholders?

- Can participants' self-defined interests inform future cultural activity?

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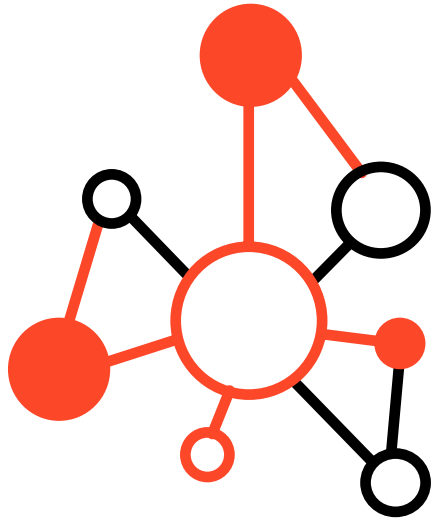
Connected

Transparent - Aware - Shared

It is easy for our evaluation activity to feel inaccessible, irrelevant or even repetitive to our stakeholders and to other sector practitioners who might otherwise learn a great deal with our work.

A connected approach considers whose voices are present in the reporting and dissemination of our findings, how these voices are represented in activity and who gets to hear and act on the findings.

Ensuring we are transparent can involve developing an awareness of the contexts in which we work, and sharing our outcomes, insight and learning with others.
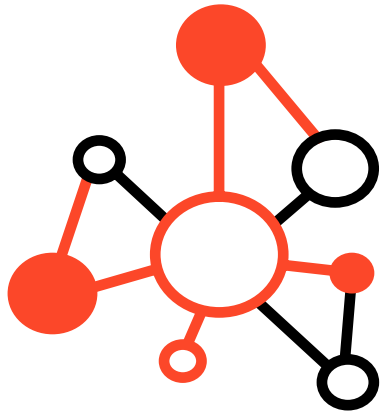
Principles into practice: questions to consider

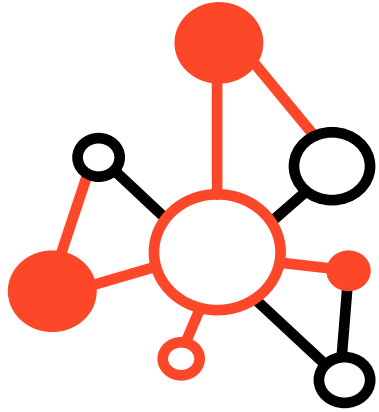**Is your evaluation activity ... transparent?**

- How might you overcome the barriers that currently prevent you from making your processes and findings accessible to stakeholders, and the wider public?

- Do you find ways to acknowledge the limitations of your evaluation processes and results?

- Do you share your evaluation findings in a range of accessible formats which suit the needs of different audiences?

- Do you seek permission to share data at the point of collection or generation?

- Can you share or publish your findings (including both successes and challenges) on open data platforms or online?
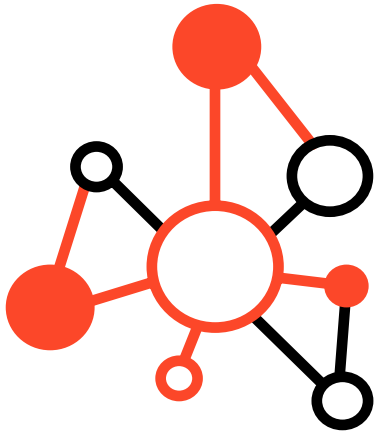
Principles into practice: questions to consider

Is your evaluation activity … aware?

- Do you have sufficient detail and information about activities, stakeholders and expected impacts before starting your evaluation activity?

- Do you have access to previous relevant evaluations and benchmark data?

- Would it be relevant to first carry out some background research or a literature review to help you identify what new knowledge you would like to focus on?

- In what ways does your own positionality (e.g. lived experience, professional role, personal position) affect the ways in which you evaluate? Is this clearly communicated in your evaluation activity?

- Are there wider societal or environmental factors that disproportionately affect particular groups that might impact on their experience of the evaluation activity? How might you take these into account?

Principles into practice: questions to consider

Is your evaluation activity ... shared?

- Who do you share the outcomes of evaluation with?

- Do you provide opportunities for feedback on your evaluation once you have shared it? What do you do with that feedback?

- Do you provide simple summaries of your evaluation, with access to more detail if desired?

- How could you work in collaboration with others, participate in peer learning and/or pool your evaluation expertise and knowledge?

Related resources

- Read more about the Evaluation Principles on our website:
  https://www.culturalvalue.org.uk/our-work/evaluation/evaluation-principles/

- Develop your evaluation skills with our free online course:
  https://www.culturalvalue.org.uk/evaluation-arts-culture-heritage-online-course/

- Explore the Evaluation Principles in our new podcast season:
  https://www.culturalvalue.org.uk/reflecting-value/

- Check out all of our free evaluation resources in one place:
  https://www.culturehive.co.uk/research-and-evaluation-practice/

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