



Technologies of Evaluation in Heritage Participation Projects

Introduction

The Kick the Dust programme (KtD) is a contemporary response to the challenges of democratising heritage participation and professionalising its evaluation. It was funded by the UK National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) and ran from 2016-22. We studied one project funded by KtD, Reimagine, Remake, Replay (RRR) in Northern Ireland, to capture the operation of an entire organisational system and its attendant valuations and evaluations of participative heritage activities.



RRR Virtual Reality Workshop

Methodology

Two research strategies were used to generate findings:

(1) We coded both KtD policy documents and official and internal evaluation measures for written evidence of the values that structured the organisational system.

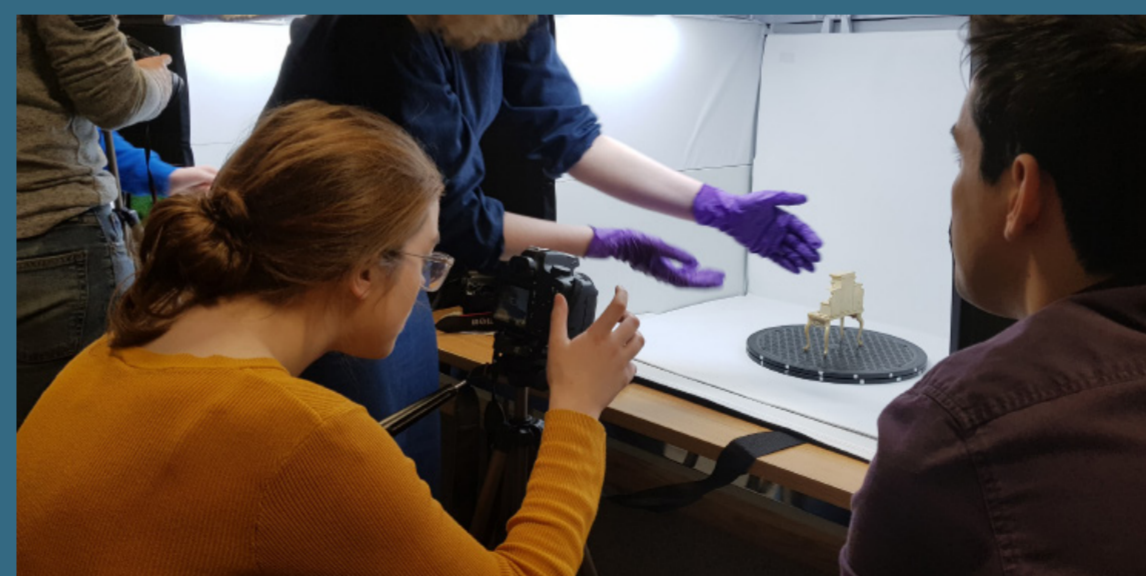
(2) We interviewed six actors from different levels of the organisational system:

- Funding body: NLHF
- Programme: KtD
- Project: RRR
- Evaluation consultancies: Renaisi and Ruth Flood Associates

Interviews were deployed to understand how technologies of evaluations were deployed in practice and what values were indexed in their practice. The case study therefore looked at the values at *programme level* (Kick the Dust) and *project level* (Reimagine, Remake, Replay).

Findings: Values

Our axiological analysis of the evaluative guidelines produced at the outset of the KtD programme found three main values attributed to participation: **Engagement** (operationalised by KtD as incentivising participation by young people in heritage), **Diversity** (operationalised as increasing the range of participants in heritage across varied socio-cultural axes), and **Collaboration** (operationalised as instigating sustained collaborative work with young people in heritage institutions, particularly in governance roles). A fourth value, **Reflexivity** (operationalised as increasing evidence-based practice and professionalising evaluation in the heritage sector) also emerged in interviews. A tacit fifth value **Justification** was also captured. We found that evaluation at programme and project level was a means to show value for money within a neoliberal funding environment in which social impacts and non-heritage externalities indicate a successful return on public investment.



Still from RRR 3D Printing Workshop

Notably, Covid-19 momentarily changed the values, value hierarchy, and valuations of the organisation. New 'lockdown values' of **sociality** and **emotional regulation** emerged as additional rationales for action during the height of the pandemic when the RRR project was delivered remotely.



Still from Absolute Rocket: Ulster Museum Late Night Event

Conclusion: Value Tensions

A key tension within the case exists between programme-level technologies of evaluation predicated on advocacy and internal, more reflexive, project-level evaluations. Official evaluation technologies are set at the KtD programme level to be deployed at both KtD programme and project level, and by the heritage organisations as well as private companies who provide evaluation. Such official evaluation occurs on a long time horizon and is most useful for demonstrating 'impact', which in turn justifies the receipt of funding and provides a basis for further grant applications. Internal reflexive evaluation occurs at project level, especially within individual events and by frontline staff, who deliver activities to young people. These provide active feedback to staff to allow ongoing changes in the delivery of activities and to make them more effective or enjoyable for participants. In addition, the case study points to wider tensions, such as the influence of neoliberal policy in non-profit spaces, and the challenge to heritage organisations presented by democratisation, especially the inclusion of young people as both audience members and decision-makers.



Extract from RRR Programme - Absolute Rocket: Ulster Museum Late Night Event

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