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EVALUATION AS PARTICIPATORY DESIGN PRACTICE

Extending and Capturing Impact

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Reconceptualising evaluation as a participatory design practice enables the centring of participant experiences, extending the potential impact of the types of projects in this book. Evaluation is a process to demonstrate the efficacy or outcomes of a project: capturing the experiences of those who take part and establishing if, or what, meaningful change happened as a result. The evaluation practice described here is particularly pertinent for creative projects that open up nuanced conversations around complex problems, such as climate justice, without easy answers or obvious takeaway actions for participants. It is significant for the practices shared in this book, which aim to enable transformation, in part, by holding space for difficult conversations. Understanding participant experiences is doubly important in these contexts: first, to capture any change that has taken place; but, second, to extend the potential of any impact by embedding reflection moments into the experience, which can lead to making new connections and resolutions. Evaluation enables the sharing of project outcomes with funders or stakeholders, making the case for the work's importance (which can support applications to fund a next stage), but it is also possible to make it a key part of a change process. In this chapter, I will propose evaluation as a participatory design practice and discuss three main phases: invitation, scaffolding and unpacking in the context of *The Island by Coney*.

Existing evaluation practices are commonly used in a summative assessment of impact, using theory of change or logic model approaches that predetermine possible meaningful outcomes and test whether those have been achieved. The challenge with such approaches is that they become separated from participants' experiences, risk being patronising in their assumption of meaningful impact and are unable to capture the nuances of change. These also often focus on quantitative evaluation outcomes, methods and indicators, which similarly miss the capacity

for nuance and are easily applied inappropriately due to a lack of resources to develop bespoke evaluation. Existing cultural and creative evaluation guidance is more focused on general good practice, such as the Evaluation Principles developed at the Centre for Cultural Value.¹ Other projects, such as CreaTures (Vervoort et al., 2024), which is mentioned in earlier chapters, have developed a critique of arts evaluation for transformation and offer qualitative tools and essays relating specifically to experiential and participatory projects.² The approach proposed in this chapter aims to contribute to shifting evaluation from an add-on activity at the end of a project to being meaningfully embedded within experiential and participatory practices.

Reframing evaluation (and audience research) as a practice can change the way we think about it and the place it has within projects. This practice builds on participatory performance, where participants are asked to contribute in a range of ways, and theatre audience research practice, which acknowledges that in audience research we co-construct the meaning of theatre experiences with participants (see Sedgman, 2016, 2019). Embedding evaluation within the design process of the whole project enables a holistic consideration of the participant experience and creates the potential for additional impact. Embedding evaluation in the experience also creates opportunities for reflection and dialogue, which, in turn, enable participants to extend their meaning-making processes whilst remaining in control of what meaningful impact means for them. A performance studies perspective on audience research highlights that taking part in such reflective processes is not a neutral act. Rather, when well designed, audience research further develops a participant's experience, because the process of being asked specific questions and sharing parts of an experience with another person makes new or stronger connections between meaning, purpose and experience. Evaluation as practice can embed this understanding into the design of the project to create a richer and more meaningful participant experience as well as making change more likely.

Cognitive philosophy on meaning-making helps us understand how reframing evaluation as a participatory design practice supports more effective strategies. 4E cognition demonstrates that meaning is made in exchange: with other people, our environment, our bodies and through interactions (4E stands for embodied, embedded, enactive and extended – see Menary, 2010; Hibbert, 2016, for an introduction to 4E cognition and Johnson, 2007; Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008 for an introduction to embodied cognition). Participatory sense-making, as part of a 4E cognitive framework, helps elucidate how evaluation and audience research are processes of joint meaning-making within an aesthetic frame (or design practice). Participatory sense-making is fundamentally intersubjective and focuses on the role of the interaction process, both with others and the context (Fuchs & De Jaegher, 2009). Rather than considering social phenomena as events that are external to the perceiver, and which simply need to be interpreted, this theory outlines how interaction is a process within which a participant is immersed. This means

that the process itself plays a cognitive role; we cannot be separated from the situations that we find ourselves in and neither can our sense-making processes (De Jaegher, 2009, p. 538). In the context of evaluation and audience research, this helps us move beyond a positivist framework (which places the audience as separate from an event) and move towards a pluralist or interpretivist perspective (see Dreyfus & Taylor, 2015). The fundamentally relational nature of participatory sense-making situates it as a productive conceptual framework for understanding how evaluation interacts with, and potentially enhances, audience meaning-making processes.

The types of participatory practices discussed in this book also frequently include the opportunity for participants to make decisions, contributions or changes to the work, and it is equally important to consider participant *agency* in the context of evaluation. Agency within evaluation can range from contributing experiences through a conversation to co-designing the evaluation strategy, which, as with other mechanisms, includes different opportunities for making choices and contributions. The contextual approach to agency in participatory performance that I have developed (Breel, 2025) highlights the importance of differentiating between agentic behaviour (where someone carries out an action that looks to an observer as a decision) and experienced agency (articulated as a choice by the participant), as only the latter is where agency becomes meaningful for them. The focus on experience as a way of determining meaning reframes who gets to decide what value and impact look like in the context of choices, which contextual agency does by highlighting the difference between external assumptions and embodied experience (which requires audience research). This, in turn, can support improvements to the design of an experience, ensuring that participants can engage as intended (see, for instance, the iterative design of the role-play in Chapter 13, which responds to the built-in evaluative process with all participants, the extended debrief). Contextual agency distinguishes between different types of agency to help better understand and design for experiences:

- **Reactive agency:** where participants are given a choice between specific options;
- **Interactive agency:** a more open opportunity to respond, such as being invited to determine what meaningful change looks like;
- **Creative agency:** where participants contribute something to a situation that was not already present, such as contributing to an overall evaluation approach.

Each of these agency types can be either observed or experienced, and it is essential in discussions of agency to be clear which perspective is being examined. Both the evaluation strategy and the project as a whole need to consider contextual agency in the experiences they strive for.

Emergent Value

Developing evaluation as a design practice also means reconsidering what impact looks like and how to hold space for a plurality of experiences. Whilst the overall evaluation strategy for a project might need to include instrumental aspects, for instance, to satisfy funder requirements, if it is to function as part of a design practice it needs to embed an *Emergent Value* approach.³ *Emergent Value*, as a concept, proposes that we need to pay attention to the personal ways participants ascribe meaning to their experiences. It means taking a pluralist approach to understanding how people make sense of their (art) experiences through person-specific connections between elements of the work they're encountering and the experiences, value systems and ideas they bring into that situation. This approach is particularly appropriate for the practices outlined in this book; when responding to eco-social challenges we need to create an ecology of individual interpretations and actions. Any evaluation approach must therefore be rooted in plurality beyond traditional impact evaluation strategies, such as those based on indicators. An *Emergent Value* strategy offers a level of nuance that goes beyond an instrumentalised one (where outcomes are pre-decided) and includes four key aspects:

- **Participant-centred:** participants are the experts on their own experience and decide what is meaningful for them or what impact looks like.
- **Embedded:** making evaluation and reflection feel part of the overall journey for the participant is key, even when the activity happens towards the end of the experience.
- **Invitational:** the intention behind the offer is that it is for the participant first (for instance, making it fun or interesting to take part in) and that they are in control of sharing if/what they want to.
- **Contextual:** working to acknowledge the varied, complex processes of meaning-making and capturing the context to interpret a plurality of responses.

Emergent Value also embeds an understanding of demand characteristics: a concept that describes the ways we seek social purpose in our interactions, wanting to find value in taking part, either for ourselves or for others (Orne, 2002). Demand characteristics determine if and how we take part and significantly impact the kinds of responses we provide. The frequency of feedback requests for much of what people touch (such as public facilities, purchases and interactions) has set up established patterns of expectation. These patterns frame the way most people will receive requests for feedback and impact how they decide whether to take part and what to share. In the context of arts events, many audience members complete evaluations for artists, festivals and venues as an explicit act of support (data provided to the *Pudding: Facilitating Audience Interpretation* research project, 2021–22). They understand the need for evaluation, to submit to funders and support future work, so they share their experiences to help. The invitational

aspect of *Emergent Value* is a response to this: offering the chance to take part in something that may have some intrinsic value (for instance, it is fun, offers space to reflect or extends the experience). This aims to shift the relationship between the evaluative exercise and participant, to step out of traditional extractive evaluation frameworks (extractive even if participants choose to take part for altruistic reasons). Additionally, this can shift the experience of the exercise, making it more effective for participants in processing their experiences and making new connections and meanings. In turn, this has the potential to lead to the collection of more nuanced and meaningful data.

Evaluation as Practice

Framing evaluation as participatory design practice means thinking about the flow of the process that participants go through. Ideally, any evaluative or reflective aspects are embedded within the work's arc and aesthetics, to ensure that it *feels* part of the experience. Evaluation as practice can be broken down into three phases that require devising: invitation, scaffolding and unpacking. In practice, these three phases might overlap or blur into each other, depending on the situation, but I outline the contribution of each phase separately below. This section also draws attention to different starting points for developing an evaluative approach, whilst acknowledging that any evaluation is fundamentally contextual and so determined by the wider project and design practice. It can be difficult to imagine how this might work, so I use *The Island* by Coney⁴ here as a case study to illustrate the ideas and provide a context.

The Island was developed as part of the Erasmus+ funded project *Codename Seedling*.⁵ The project brought together two groups of young people from island nations: the UK and Vanuatu (in collaboration with *Wan Smolbag* theatre company) in a digital exchange of videos, questions and materials. Through this creative exchange, the young people co-created an imagined island whilst exploring themes of shared responsibility and care. From this exchange, a 2–3 hour long performance workshop for adult audiences was developed that aimed to spark conversations about climate justice (performed four times at Shoreditch Town Hall in April 2025).

The performance workshop started with a welcome to participants, introductions to the facilitators and a description of the exchange process that had occurred between the two groups of young people. It also defined climate justice as a concept and highlighted that this included exploring power and colonialism. The work of the performance was for participants to construct a recreation of the island, layer by layer (see Figure 14.1 for the island mid-workshop). Each layer included a video made by the young people to share what they had created. When people entered the space, only the red outlines were present (see Figure 14.1) and participants, guided by the videos, placed cards representing each imagined part of the island on the floor in front of them (such as the described giant robot and cat's treehouse). Once the group was happy that they had faithfully recreated the island



FIGURE 14.1 The space showing the island as well as the tea station and materials at the back.

Credit: Ross Kernahan.

as it had been co-imagined by the two groups of young people, participants were invited to respond and create a new layer. There were a few ways to do this:

- Responding to a question posed by one of the young participants (in the original exchange between the UK and Vanuatu) about an area of the island they wanted to know more about or develop further;
- Zooming in using a frame (of different shapes), which, when overlaid on a part of the island, enabled a focus within which details could be added;
- Creating something new, using a range of materials including paper, wooden sticks, string and Blu Tack (all intended to be reused);
- Engaging with one of the two microphones: a noticing microphone (where anyone could go and describe what they saw happening) and one for reading out information about the exchange, whenever a cat's miaow was played;
- Reflection Corner (described below);
- A tea station where participants could make a cup of tea, read the contents of an envelope containing climate justice information and take a UV pen to write a reflection on with whom/where power is held on the island.

The room also contained information about climate justice and materials from the young people's exchange. After taking part in the activities described, it was time

to make a video documenting the next layer of the island for future participants. A “storm” interrupts the recording and leads to the lights going off and black lights going on, allowing participants to read the hidden statements on the island written in UV pen (Figure 14.2). These statements responded to the questions around power and (natural) resources on the island and explored aspects of climate justice, with participants making visible the tensions between the fun creation aspect of the workshop and the difficult consideration of the impact of our actions on the environment. Following the making of the recording, the debrief section of the performance workshop included a creative reflection exercise (discussed below) and a group conversation to decide and record a one sentence collective commitment.

The Invitation

Developing the invitation is the first of three stages of evaluation, mentioned above. It is how a participant enters the evaluative moment or process. This can be part of the introduction to the whole event or made specifically for a reflective moment. The core considerations to communicate with participants, within the invitation, centre on transparency and consent: clarity on why they are being asked to do this, what choices they have and what might happen with any responses



FIGURE 14.2 Messages written in UV under black light. One participant has written ‘so many pens in the sea’.

Credit: Ross Kernahan.

they share is important (as other authors describe too, care is paramount). The purpose is to communicate the right frame for the participant to reflect in; for instance, whether they are doing this as part of their private experience or whether they might be asked to share any reflections. Some participatory practices already include embedded and holistic approaches to bringing participants into a project; for instance, *larp* includes preparatory workshop(s) to make decisions together and co-designed projects often include a process to collectively decide meaningful outcomes. The invitation for the evaluative moment can happen within the world of the work or outside it, which, in turn, communicates the purpose in the context of the participant's wider experience. Whilst consent and clarity on the available choice are always important, the desired use of potential responses determines how much detail to provide to participants (for instance, if responses might be shared publicly).

Space for reflection was embedded in two ways into *The Island*: Reflection Corner and the debrief section at the end of the workshop (including a creative reflection exercise).

Reflection Corner was designed to support participants to step back from the main action during the contribution phase. Being asked to contribute something to the island in response to the creations of young people in the UK and Vanuatu, and in the context of climate justice, created a complex situation: participants were not only asked to add something, but also consider the impact of using materials and the colonial context of imposing content/structure on a new land. The invitation to Reflection Corner was presented at the same time as other activities with a similarly open and responsive facilitation approach to support participants in the challenge.

The second space for reflection was the debrief section at the end of the workshop. The debrief included an individual creative reflection exercise, group conversation and the development of a collective commitment, recorded on a cassette tape. Participants were invited into the debrief section with an explanation that their time together was coming to an end and, having collectively explored climate justice, everyone would reflect on this together before going back into the world. The debrief section was part of the overall flow of the event, framed as a way of reflecting on care and responsibility together, in the context of a complex and possibly difficult topic. The invitation continued the thoughtful facilitation strategy of the performance workshop in clearly setting out what would happen and the choices available.

Scaffolding

Scaffolding describes the way you hold people within a reflective process. This is sensitive to the context as well as the specific individuals taking part, which means that the four central *Emergent Value* aspects are particularly useful here. Designing good scaffolding requires a *participant-centred* approach that understands that

they have their own processes for making meaning from their experiences. Not only will they find personal connections that cannot be predicted, but participants will have different preferences and needs for reflection. Whilst it is not practical to pre-empt every possible preference, it repays to offer some choice within a reflective moment, even if this is simply the option to step out of a group conversation for individual reflection. The choice of mechanism, however, must not be so open that it feels like a blank page, making it difficult to know where to start. There is a balance to be struck in holding open-enough space to invite a wide range of responses, without overwhelming participants. Practical considerations for designing a reflective scaffolding approach for a project include considering participants' agency in the choices available to them. The work may already have affordances for reflection or sharing that can be built upon, for instance, within the type of choices offered to participants.

Creative reflection approaches can support participants to draw new connections between their lived experience and the work as part of their meaning-making processes, in turn, enhancing their experience. Designing a reflective strategy as *embedded* and *invitational* supports the development of appropriate creative strategies that fit within the wider aesthetic experience. Another benefit of an embedded approach is that considering the contribution of the reflective element to the overall experience ensures it is a meaningful offer for the participant. This also helps shift the reason for reflection away from primarily artist or funder purposes. As with other parts of developing a participatory performance, scaffolding strategies benefit from playtesting with participants to see whether they land in the right way.

It is important to be clear on the purpose of any reflection for the participant's experience to ensure it is meaningfully embedded. For instance, it might work well for them to reflect within the world of the work or it might need some distance (e.g. in Chapter 13, the debrief happens outside the role-play). The questions chosen will prompt participants to make new connections or associations, meaning they should be carefully crafted. Some reflections might be meaningful to capture to better understand participant experiences and iterate, requiring a strategy for collection (which can include participant choice in how much to share).

The scaffolding within Reflection Corner included an informal conversation to identify the reason for coming over and suggestions for how to reflect together (for instance, through conversation or using a creative strategy, through writing or drawing). This employed the work's aesthetic, which thoughtfully held space for a range of responses and conducted agency in a similar way (see Breel, 2025).

For the creative reflection exercise within the debrief, participants were each given a lined index card and pen and taken through a process to write a metaphor about their experience of care and responsibility in *The Island*.⁶ They were invited to think about a moment in their experience and then complete the sentence: 'Experiencing care / responsibility in The Island felt like...' They could describe a feeling they had, a situation in which they felt similar or something

it reminded them of. They could include visual or other sensory responses and any other details. Finally, they were asked to decide on a title for their metaphor and write it at the top of the card (Figure 14.3). Participants then left these placed around the island as we moved into the group conversation about their experiences, to work towards a collective commitment. At the end, participants were asked if they would donate their reflections to the research (and the project) by leaving their cards behind or letting us take a picture of them. The scaffolding for this section included the structure of the creative exercise and the facilitation of the group conversation, which then moved into the unpacking stage.

Unpacking

Unpacking is the process of considering what came up during the scaffolded reflection process and making connections or noticing themes that arise. This can happen multiple times in an experience, rather than only at the end, depending on how many reflective moments the journey contains. It can include space for participants to share perspectives with each other and/or the artist but can also focus on individual reflection. In my experience, participants value hearing others' thoughts on a shared journey. Furthermore, enabling a conversation space for sharing can extend and enhance people's meaning-making processes and help to fix any takeaways, such as resultant actions.



FIGURE 14.3 Participants writing their metaphors.

Credit: Ross Kernahan.

When designing the unpacking stage of reflection in a work, it is key to consider how this stage fits within their experience as a whole: Is it happening in-world (led by characters) or as a moment to step out of the experience? Is it a collective experience or are there solo moments? Are participants asked to share anything that will be recorded? How are any exchanges facilitated? In situations where the scaffolding flows directly into unpacking, the focus of the latter is on exploring the significance of what emerged in the scaffolded section.

Unpacking was adapted to each participant within Reflection Corner and took a conversational approach that followed on from the scaffolding without a break. Some participants articulated a new perspective, whilst others shared that it had been helpful in deciding how to take part in the other activities. These responses demonstrate that Reflection Corner successfully functioned as a space to sort out conflicting feelings about contributing, whilst holding care and responsibility. Participants also articulated that Reflection Corner was a meaningful part of their experience, without which they would have found it more stressful and difficult to fully engage with the performance workshop.

The unpacking within the debrief section focused on the central themes of the work (care and responsibility) and was facilitated in a way that provided structure with openness and choice. This echoed the participatory aesthetics of the experience and afforded a similar creative agency within participants' responses. In follow-up interviews with some participants (done as a meta-evaluation to explore the efficacy of the creative reflection exercise), the majority articulated that it helped them think more expansively, process their experience or connect with it more deeply. Several participants stated that they might not have engaged in this level of reflection without the exercise and that it felt like a meaningful process as part of the overall experience.

Conclusion

Framing evaluation as a participatory design practice with a significant impact on meaning-making is a call to action for those engaged in experiential and participatory design practices, especially when making work with an eco-social focus. Existing evaluation practices tend to predetermine what meaningful impact looks like, to test this assumption and use extractive methods of data collection without offering anything back to participants. The practice outlined in this chapter, of working within an *Emergent Value* framework, operates in a participant-centred way, which enables the extension and enhancement of participants' experiences with the opportunity to learn from their meaning-making. This can enhance the process and depth of any required evaluation for a funder or other key stakeholder, even if these necessitate the use of predetermined outcomes or quantitative methods. Framing the entire evaluation as a chance to gain a better understanding of participant experiences leads to more nuanced data whilst creating the potential for extending impact.

I end with some questions to reflect on when designing an evaluation process:

- What conversation(s) would be meaningful to have with my audience/participants?
- What do I hope to learn from their experiences?
- At what stage is the work? (A playtest has very different needs from something finished or co-created)
- What aesthetics within the work lend themselves to a reflection moment or process?
- How can I co-decide what impact or meaningful change looks like with my participants/partners?
- What fun or interesting reflective experience can I offer to my participants?

Notes

- 1 See <https://www.culturehive.co.uk/CVResources/our-essential-reads-evaluation-principles-in-practice/>
- 2 See, for instance, <https://creaturesframework.org/>
- 3 See www.astridbreel.com/emergent-value for more information.
- 4 Coney is represented here by Toby Peach, Mel Frances, Germma Orleans-Thompson, and Pavlos Christodoulou. More information about the project is available at: <https://coneyhq.org/project/the-island/> and <https://www.modgames.co.uk/projects/theisland>.
- 5 See <https://codenameseedling.my.canva.site/> for more information about the project and outcomes.
- 6 In the exercise, and the text here, I am not using the term metaphor in a technical sense (the exercise invites a simile rather than a metaphor) but to communicate clearly with participants on what they are aiming for in their response. Through testing, I have learnt that metaphor is more easily understood in the context of being asked to find a creative comparison between something in the work and their other experiences.

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