

Evaluation Lessons from a Theatre Company

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Charter Theatre is a small professional theatre in Washington, DC. Its mission is to develop and produce new plays. This includes seeking out new plays, working with the playwrights to clarify their aesthetic intentions, developing a strong script, and then producing those plays. Like other organizations, Charter Theatre wants to be accountable. Its members believe they are responsible to the audience to do the best work they can do. They saw the need for evaluation early on—a repeatable process to assure the quality of their work. However, they didn't want a factory that would create the same kind of work over and over. In theatre, variety is part of the point. In developing their process, Charter Theatre's Artistic Director questioned, "How do you evaluate a play without sucking all the life from it?"

The arts and evaluation have often been viewed as somewhat at odds. Elliot Eisner speaks to this in *The Arts and the Creation of Mind* (2002) when he writes about assessment and evaluation in arts education. According to Eisner, judgments of the quality of student work are often viewed as "impediments to the liberation of creative potential" (p. 178).

- Assessment and evaluation connote measurement and quantification, which is viewed by many as incompatible with the arts.
- Assessment and evaluation generally focus more on outcomes and products, whereas arts educators view the process as what's important.
- Assessment is associated with testing and standardization, neither of which is compatible with the arts.
- The narrowing influences of formal assessment and evaluation are considered counterproductive.

Similarly, in their book, *Getting to Maybe: How the World is Changed*, Westley, Zimmerman, and Patton (2006) discuss the disconnect between creativity and critical analysis, and perceptions that evaluation may, in fact, inhibit creativity and innovation. They write, "A key to encouraging innovation is to explore and adopt less narrow and restrictive approaches to evaluation" (p. 51).

Evaluation at Charter Theatre

Charter Theatre's development process is infused with evaluation. Their evaluation approach most closely resembles developmental evaluation (see Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2001; Westley et al., 2006), as the dramaturges, actors, and audience ask questions, monitor results, and provide feedback to support the play's development and production. Charter's process is also similar to organizational learning approaches where evaluation takes on a facilitative, coaching, and mentoring role; and is ongoing and integrated into work practices (Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2001). For Charter Theatre, their evaluation process is an integral part of developing new plays; it allows them to strike the necessary balance between supporting and criticizing. The following documentation of Charter Theatre's development and evaluation process is based on interviews and written communication with Charter Theatre's Artistic Director, and written notes from observations of the process. The process includes Level 1 Reading, Level 2 Reading, and Rehearsal.

Level 1 Reading (Reading Series)

The goal of Level 1 Reading is to clarify the playwright's intent—what they really want, the original inspiration, what they want the audience to feel and to leave with. Charter almost always does a Level 1 Reading. There is no staging for a Level 1 Reading. The point is to let the actors "say it" and to "hear it." They use a team of actors that is good at dealing with new work—e.g., they don't add to the script; they let it not make sense if it doesn't make sense. Of course it's important to be aware of the limitations of the Level 1 environment—plays aren't reading. Level 1 Reading includes a rehearsal, a public reading, and a debriefing.

1. The Rehearsal: There is one rehearsal prior to a public reading. After the rehearsal, the actors discuss the play and provide some

feedback. The act of preparing for the public reading generates a creative energy in and of itself.

2. The Public Reading: The actors do a public reading of the play. Following the reading, the dramaturges moderate an informal, relaxed discussion with the audience. The playwright sits in the audience. Although the audience is told that the playwright is in attendance, he or she is not identified. There are more structured discussion methods designed in part to be protective of the artist, but Charter's experience is that too much structure tends to stifle the audience. The goal is to make the play better, not to make the playwright feel good.

The discussion is focused on getting a genuine reaction from the audience. For example, the dramaturges typically ask the audience what they felt, what they enjoyed, what they found distracting, what didn't make sense, what worked and what didn't. It is important to note that Charter doesn't want prescriptive feedback such as suggestions or the audience's ideas for the play. When an audience member offers ideas or suggestions, the dramaturges shift the discussion to, "why do you think that?" to refocus the discussion on reaction. The discussion usually organically shifts to what they didn't like and didn't understand.

3. The Debriefing: The dramaturges debrief with the playwright following the public reading. The focus of the debriefing is not on the writing, it's on the decision-making. The process is not about editing plays for playwrights; it's about clarifying the playwright's intention and giving feedback to help the playwright make appropriate decisions given that intention. The clearer the dramaturges are about the playwright's intention, the better feedback they can give. According to Charter's Artistic Director, there is the message, the vehicle and the audience, and the goal is to achieve the fullest, most honest message and delivery. If

everybody works with the same intention and has the same intent in mind, it will be better for the audience.

Level 2 Reading (Workshop)

What happens at Level 2 depends on the play. Sometimes there's another public reading. Sometimes they move straight to reading rehearsals. The goal at this level is to challenge the writer to make decisions, focus the play, and get better clarity. Feedback from the reading rehearsals comes from the director, the dramaturges, and the actors; mostly in the form of questions.

Rehearsal

This is full rehearsal of the play. At this level, the playwright may still be accessible, but the responsibility shifts from the playwright to the director and his or her understanding of the intent of the play.

Production: What Does Success Look Like?

There are traditionally three ways to consider success in the performing arts: (1) attendance, (2) critical response, and (3) audience response and enjoyment. Attendance is obviously the most quantifiable. Critical response, the extent to which the audience gets the message, often gets the most weight and attention. However, audience response and enjoyment is the goal of Charter's process—the thinking is that the other measures of success will follow appropriately from this. The process is based on the principal that the more honest and clear the message and delivery is to the audience the more fully they will respond to and enjoy the play.

Lessons for Evaluation

Lessons for evaluation include lessons related to internal accountability, intent, and decision-making.

Internal Accountability Supports Learning

When discussing the current accountability movement, Westley et al. (2006) state:

In both the political and philanthropic arenas, this has led to more paperwork and reporting requirements, but not particularly meaningful accountability. It's like a game of charades in which programs guess at what will satisfy the demand for accountability without actually internalizing what it means to be accountable. . . . But for value-driven social innovators the highest form of accountability is internal (p. 180).

In addition, some evaluators are noting a divide in the evaluation field: evaluation for accountability or control and evaluation for development and learning (King, 2007). Charter Theatre's process is evaluation for development—internal accountability. Charter Theatre's members believe that they are responsible to the audience to do the best work they can do. They don't "have" to do evaluation, but they value its role in the process of developing and producing new plays.

Focusing on Intent Is Active and Holistic

The definition of intent is: (a) something that is intended; purpose; design; intention; (b) the act or fact of intending, as to do something; and (c) meaning or significance. Thus, intent is active and implies action for purpose, meaning, and significance.

In their book, *Presence: An Exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations, and Society*, Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, and Flowers (2004) write about intent, or intention, as something systemic instead of individualistic. It is holistic

and larger than any one person. In addition, Westley et al. (2006), when discussing complexity and innovation, pose the question, “to what extent and in what ways can we be deliberate and intentional about those things that seem to emerge without our control, without our intention?” (p. 21).

“Intent” and “intention” are a big part of Charter Theatre’s development and evaluation process. Throughout the Level 1 and Level 2 Readings, the purpose is to clarify the playwright’s intent, and to make decisions that support that intent. During rehearsal, the responsibility for being true to the playwright’s intent shifts to the director. If everybody works with the same intention and has the same intent in mind, it will be better for the audience. In fact, the highest level of success, critical response, is the extent to which the audience gets the message and the playwright’s intent is realized.

Focusing on Decision-Making Requires Ongoing Feedback and Reflection

Decision-oriented theories of evaluation have often been linked to evaluation use and the need to design evaluations that will assist key stakeholders in making decisions about a program (Alkin & Christie, 2004). In addition, developmental evaluation highlights the importance of reflection as part of the evaluation process—“standing still as a foundation for the next move forward” (Westley et al., p. 84).

Throughout Charter Theatre’s development process, the focus is on providing quick and ongoing feedback to help the playwright make decisions about his or her work. The focus is not on the writing, it’s on decision-making to better focus the play and clarify intent. Decision-making also requires constant reflection. The playwright is pushed to reflect on the feedback in light of his or her aesthetic intention; and to make decisions that clarify the

intent for the stakeholders—e.g., actors, director, and audience.

Concluding Thoughts

How do you evaluate a play without sucking all the life from it? For that matter, how do you evaluate a program without sucking all the life from it? Charter Theatre has managed to find the right balance between creating and evaluating. Their developmental evaluation approach focuses on internal accountability for learning; intent, action and holism; and decision-making through ongoing feedback and reflection. The arts are about creating and learning; evaluation can be as well.

References

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