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Direction and Desire Culture Sector Research for the Next Decade Direction et désir Recherche dans le secteur de la culture pour la prochaine décennie

Mary Elizabeth Luka and Robin Sokoloski

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Article abstract

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Direction and Desire: Culture Sector Research for the Next Decade

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Abstract: In this contribution, Research in Residence (RinR) co-facilitators Mary Elizabeth Luka and Robin Sokolski host a conversation with members of the RinR Funder Advisory, addressing the dynamics of collaboration, impact assessment, and applied research in the Canadian culture sector, using RinR as a case in point. While projects and operational approaches that incorporate partnerships and collaboration have been encouraged and funded for many decades through programs such as the Digital Strategy Fund at the Canada Council for the Arts, or by the Social Sciences and Research Council of Canada through its suite of partnership grants, how funders collaborate or enable partnerships among themselves or more directly with sector organizations has been less supported or evident. Additionally, over the last decade, industry and scholarly researchers have repeatedly noted that the sector tends to depend on a narrow band of research practices to conduct impact assessments— primarily from financial or economic points of view—and thereby to inform future directions not just for the organizations but also for the sector. To respond to this situation, in 2020, Mass Culture convened a series of discussions that resulted in various levels of resource support as well as participation commitments from several funder organizations for what became the Research-in-Residence: Arts’ Civic Impact initiative in 2021-23. This article traces the snowball effect of bringing various levels of funders onboard for this project before turning to discussions of how the group worked together throughout the project, including key learnings shared across the funding ecosystem and into the sector.

Keywords: Culture Sector, Impact Assessment, Network Governance, Knowledge Sharing

Résumé : Dans cette contribution, les co-facilitateurs de "Research in Residence" (RinR), Mary Elizabeth Luka et Robin Sokolski, animent une conversation avec les membres du RinR Funder Advisory, abordant les dynamiques de collaboration, d'évaluation de l'impact et de recherche appliquée dans le secteur culturel canadien, en utilisant RinR comme exemple. Bien que les projets et les approches opérationnelles intégrant des partenariats et des collaborations aient été encouragés et financés pendant de nombreuses décennies par des programmes tels que le Fonds stratégique numérique du Conseil des Arts du Canada ou par le Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines du Canada par le biais de ses subventions de partenariat, la manière dont les bailleurs de fonds collaborent ou favorisent les partenariats entre eux ou plus directement avec

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les organisations du secteur a été moins soutenue ou évidente. De plus, au cours de la dernière décennie, les chercheurs industriels et universitaires ont à plusieurs reprises noté que le secteur tend à dépendre d'une bande étroite de pratiques de recherche pour mener des évaluations d'impact, principalement d'un point de vue financier ou économique, et ainsi à orienter les futures directions non seulement pour les organisations mais aussi pour le secteur. Pour répondre à cette situation, en 2020, Mass Culture a organisé une série de discussions qui ont abouti à divers niveaux de soutien en ressources ainsi qu'à des engagements de participation de la part de plusieurs organisations de bailleurs de fonds pour ce qui est devenu l'initiative Research-in-Residence : Impact civique des arts en 2021-23. Cet article retrace l'effet boule de neige de l'intégration de différents niveaux de bailleurs de fonds dans ce projet avant de se tourner vers les discussions sur la manière dont le groupe a travaillé ensemble tout au long du projet, y compris les principaux enseignements partagés dans l'écosystème de financement et dans le secteur.

Mots clé : Secteur culturel, évaluation d'impact, gouvernance en réseau, partage des connaissances

Introduction

The 2021-2023 Research in Residence: Arts' Civic Impact (RinR) research project brought together academics, artists, and administrators from the Canadian culture sector to develop a series of qualitative impact assessment frameworks explicitly designed for use in the sector (Luka, Nelson, Newman, & Sokoloski, 2023). It was co-facilitated by Robin Sokoloski at Mass Culture and Mary Elizabeth Luka at the University of Toronto (UT) and supported by a collaboration between Mass Culture, the Canada Council for the Arts, the Culture Statistics Working Group (Federal-Provincial-Territorial Culture and Heritage Table), the Ontario Trillium Foundation, and the Toronto Arts Foundation. The initiative involved researchers from five universities, including UT: McGill University, Emily Carr University's Aboriginal Gathering Place, University of Winnipeg, Dalhousie University, and Carleton University. The graduate student researchers ('interns') and their areas of focus included: Sydney Pascal, Indigenous Cultural Knowledge; Emma Bugg, Climate and Sustainability; Aaron Richmond, Health and Wellbeing; Shanice Bernicky, Diversity and Inclusion; Audree Espada and Missy LeBlanc, Diversity and Inclusion. Over the two years, RinR trained the interns to develop sector-appropriate methodological designs, connect with and select potential case studies (arts organizations), and conduct studies that resulted in the development of three flexible impact assessment frameworks. The putative frameworks were tested in a series of roundtables across the country and are now available for use on the Mass Culture website.ⁱ

In this contribution, RinR co-facilitators Mary Elizabeth Luka and Robin Sokolsoki host a conversation with members of the RinR Funder Advisory, addressing the dynamics of collaboration, impact assessment, and applied research in the Canadian culture sector, using RinR as a case in point. While projects and operational approaches that incorporate partnerships and collaboration

have been encouraged and funded for many decades through programs such as the Digital Strategy Fund at the Canada Council for the Arts, or by the Social Sciences and Research Council of Canada through its suite of partnership grants, how funders collaborate or enable partnerships among themselves or more directly with sector organizations has been less supported or evident. Additionally, over the last decade, industry and scholarly researchers have repeatedly noted that the sector tends to depend on a narrow band of research practices to conduct impact assessments—primarily from financial or economic points of view—and thereby to inform future directions not just for the organizations but also for the sector (e.g., Dempwolf et al., 2014; Essig, 2018; Luka, Nelson, Newman, & Sokoloski, 2023). The approaches for measuring impact that have been used tend to depend on specific fundraising or marketing campaign goals or to enumerate uses of and outputs from the use of public and private funding so that grant recipients (for example), might better account for public funds. However, these approaches do not necessarily account for a better understanding of the long-term or wide spectrum of impacts that are possible and desirable in the field (e.g., Crossick & Kaszynska, 2019; Luka & Klimek, 2023; Thompson & Campbell, 2022). To respond to this situation, in 2020, Mass Culture convened a series of discussions that resulted in various levels of resource support, as well as participation commitments from several funder organizations for what became the Research-in-Residence: Arts' Civic Impact initiative in 2021-23.

The discussion below traces the snowball effect of bringing various levels of funders onboard for this project before turning to discussions on how the group worked together throughout the project, including key learnings shared across the funding ecosystem and into the sector. While it is often necessary to bring municipal, provincial/territorial, and federal sources of support together for capital or other major projects, it is unusual for a coalition of funding bodies to have ongoing mentoring or feedback relationships with the participants in those projects. This is, in part, to preserve previously established best practices for creative and administrative decision-making in the sector, including having funders and politicians operate at arms-length from creative workers and organizations (*i.e.*, to prevent dictating processes, outcomes, etc.), and to mobilize a peer assessment process of evaluation. The peer assessment and arms-length funding system recognizes that expertise in assessing specific projects or operational approaches is most readily available among others who are already doing similar work.

At the same time, there is knowledge-sharing expertise that arises among funders and policymakers over time, particularly when evidence is aggregated by these groups from various funded initiatives and projects to inform visions, values, and priorities based on sector outcomes and needs. As a result, there is an important—if blunt—social engineering role that is played by funders and policymakers in this ecosystem, largely generated by the priorities set in funding programs. This is made more complex—and important—in times of leadership 'churn' (*i.e.*, significant change) in arts organizations and across the culture sector, as is the case at the time of writing, including some of the RinR partnering organizations. While some priorities in government-funded agencies and arts councils could be made susceptible to political priority-setting or mandates, combining such mandates with in-depth evidence from the sector can generate a well-balanced approach to funding decision-making. As shown in this article, by having access to a

complex project involving many arts organizations, researchers, and parts of the country, funders and policymakers were provided with a detailed insider understanding of challenges experienced throughout the sector in the execution of such projects, but also in evaluation processes. In turn, the researchers involved were able to benefit from being mentored by the funders and policymakers involved at a very early stage of their careers. Access to these conversations enabled them to avoid pitfalls and to advocate for varied and diverse outcomes.

This dialogical and adaptive process is grounded in commitments to collective action on challenges within existing systems. More specifically, the RinR process relied on a form of “network governance” (Larsson, 2020; Sørensen & Torfing, 2018) that is increasingly mobilized in democratic nation-states to address socio-cultural problems (such as inadequate housing, climate change, etc.). The process enables civic actors operating at different registers of varied power dynamics to come together, contribute, and negotiate a way forward in a project or undertaking. Ideally, this approach “makes it possible to enhance pluralism and disperse political power by transferring such power from the sovereign state to a wider set of private actors and concerned stakeholders” (Larsson, 2020, p. 111). In the RinR case, as discussed below, the process allowed for emerging researchers to be supported financially and through close coaching and mentoring with many senior experienced researchers and policymakers, in the development of impact assessment frameworks. There are risks, however, including that responsibility and legwork alike are downloaded onto parts of the population who are the most vulnerable, the least powerful, and not responsible for decisions made. Nonetheless, thinking about the RinR working structures as a form of network governance in the culture sector is useful as it can help explain how and why the funders and policymakers became as deeply imbricated in the project as they were. This case study illustrates how an arts service organization such as Mass Culture—through RinR co-leads Robin Sokoloski and ME Luka—acted as a catalyst for action in the culture sector by convening relevant groups of people from different parts of society (creative workers, academics, policymakers, funding administrators, etc.), and creating conditions for organic knowledge sharing to happen in accessible ways, with guidance and mentorship provided by scholars and senior practitioners from the sector. This approach is desirable because of its ease in offering knowledge sharing to vulnerable people while also including them. The transition to more of these types of approaches (and in contrast to previous best practices) signals the potential for a more collaborative and co-creative approach to knowledge sharing, research, leadership, and training in the culture sector.

In the Editorial Introduction to part one of this special issue of *Culture and Local Governance*, Luka et al. (2023) delineate the sequence of events that led to the selection of student interns and the rollout of the individual research projects and frameworks, which are further analyzed in articles published in both parts of this special issue (e.g., see Bernicky, 2023; Bugg, Wright & Zurba, 2023; Pascal, 2023; Richmond, 2023). The more integrated working relationship envisioned by RinR was an important part of the process to ensure that the outputs of the project would travel across funding circles as well as across the sector, enabling greater cohesion and understanding for future such initiatives. In the early days of the working relationships between the funders and the project, Luka and Sokolski proposed a collaborative and non-hierarchical governance structure that would

enable the development of a ‘community of practice’ (e.g., Markham, 2018; Wenger et al., 2002) through several feedback loops. As the process unfolded, it became clear that the initial schematic could be interpreted in a variety of ways as the project itself evolved, including between co-facilitators Luka and Sokoloski, the Funder Advisory, the student interns, the students’ academic supervisors, the arts organizations, Mass Culture staff, and the developmental evaluation team that became involved. For this contribution to the special issue, members of the Funder Advisory reflect on the advantages and challenges of using this kind of emergent and flexible governance approach, as well as their goals concerning training a new generation of applied researchers for the field, broadening the definition of research in the sector. They also reveal several of the strategies that were tested to find ways to inform and involve not just themselves as advisors, but all the participants in the project.

During the RinR project, the Funder Advisory was composed of a fluid list of representatives from various funding and support organizations. These included:

- Marke Ambard, Acting Director, Policy Research Group, Department of Canadian Heritage
- Clare Daitch, Manager of Policy and Communications for Tourism and Culture, Yukon Government and Chair of the Mass Culture Operations Group
- Liz Forsberg, Partnerships Lead, Impact, Ontario Trillium Foundation
- Annie Grégoire-Gauthier, Research Officer, Department of Canadian Heritage
- Daniela Navia, Senior Research and Evaluation Analyst, Canada Council for the Arts
- Shawn Newman, Impact Manager, Toronto Arts Foundation
- Zoe Some, Research Analyst, Policy Research Group, Department of Canadian Heritage
- Jacinthe Soulliere, Research Officer, Canada Council for the Arts
- Gabriel (Gab) Zamfir-Enache, Director of Research, Measurement and Data Analytics, Canada Council for the Arts

In addition, funder advice was periodically sought from Sarah Fairlie, the MITACS representative involved in the project. Not all members of the Advisory participated in the roundtable. Some comments have been anonymized.ⁱⁱ

In the Beginning...

Shawn Newman:

I'm the Research and Impact Manager at Toronto Arts Council and Foundation. And I was roped into this after a suggestion from Liz [Forsberg], because of my experience of having been a Mitacs Postdoctoral Fellow.

Liz Forsberg:

I am partnerships lead at the Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF). We had been working with Mass Culture for a while. Robin [Sokoloski] and I were thinking through how we could support the creation of evidence and a stronger research infrastructure in the nonprofit sector. We identified partnerships with academia as being an important thing to tackle, including how we leverage the research power of academia to support community-driven research agendas, and to break down those silos that often exist between academia and the nonprofit sector. I had been meeting with Sarah Fairlie from Mitacs to think generally about how we could leverage Mitacs funding for the nonprofit sector. So I introduced Robin [Sokoloski, from Mass Culture] and Sarah. And then the rest is history. They dreamed up a beautiful thing and this lovely collaborative partnership came to be somehow.

Gabriel [Gab] Zamfir-Enache:

I am the Director of Research, Measurement and Data Analytics at the Canada Council for the Arts. I can say this is one of the most interesting projects that we have undertaken in the last couple of years from many points of view. One is the great opportunity to bring the funders to work together and engage with the arts community. The second is that this allowed the participating arts organizations to be involved in decisions that affect them, which is not always the case in the measurement of the impact. And the third value of this project is to work with academia and create opportunities for a new generation of researchers in the arts. For me, this project started with a very nice discussion and coffee chat with Liz and Robin in Toronto. In the context of our collaboration, I was interested in how to leverage qualitative impact frameworks and create a project that will help all of us. I believe that, as a funder, we can't ever work alone. While the project is not 100% successful on all fronts – what project ever is? – we have been talking in more depth and with more [shared] knowledge in the past two years – actually, more than three years. We started before the Covid-19 pandemic.

Robin Sokoloski:

Yes, we started right before the pandemic. I crashed an event that was happening at the OTF [Ontario Trillium Foundation] offices that [established arts researchers] David Maggs, Jeanne LeSage, and Shannon Litzenberger were organizing. Liz [Forsberg] suggested that I come. We met in a side room with Gab [Zamfir-Enache] and talked about this idea. Shawn [Newman] was part of that conversation too.

Clare Daitch:

I have been co-chair of Mass Culture's Operations Group for a little while now. In my day job, I'm the manager of Policy and Communications for Tourism and Culture with the Government of Yukon and have been working in the North [i.e., the northern half of Canada] for most of my career. I've long been interested in the intersections between community-based research and how that translates into academic and policy discussions. Growing up in the North, I see big disconnects

between what happens on the ground – the conversations and the impacts of our sector – and what happens in academic streams or another jurisdiction in the country. When Robin [Sokoloski] told me about this project, I was very eager to get involved and find ways that we could bridge connections to better understand how arts have an impact beyond the traditional quantitative GDP measures, and how we can work with communities and academics to do some substantive work in that field together. We have research gaps here in the Yukon that we're trying to fill, and it seems that a lot of those research gaps exist in other jurisdictions, including the Canada Council, Canadian Heritage, and academics. The only way to really address it is for all of us to work together.

Daniela Navia:

I'm the Senior Research and Evaluation Analyst at the Canada Council. I oversee the Council's research, performance measurement, and evaluation activities. I first joined RinR once the implementation had started. My role became to support the project in planning, coordination, and envisioning how it would be delivered. I have a predominantly qualitative research background though I have also done quantitative research and mixed methods for a long time. This project was a great opportunity to develop some tools using qualitative research methodologies, and as Gab [Zamfir-Enache] was saying, to bring in different perspectives, different voices from across the country, into how organizations can think about their impact. I believe in the researcher as someone who can bring a new perspective to an organization, including different ways of thinking and connecting with a community that may not be familiar or that can build on some of the existing work that's happening in the sector. In a nutshell, I'm interested in qualitative impact measurement, equity issues, community engagement, social justice, and how all of that intersects.

From Decision-making to Relationship-building

Mary Elizabeth (M.E.) Luka:

I was the lead academic on RinR and am an Assistant Professor at the University of Toronto. My research looks at how the arts, media, and culture intersect with and impact society in a variety of ways.

As we think back through the project, can you identify one or two key decision points that were crucial to the success of the project, so far as you would define it as a success, taking on board Gab[riel Zamfir-Enache]'s observation that if it was 100% successful, we wouldn't have needed to do the work? What are the learnings that you took away about how the sector and academic systems could interact to support the arts in society?

Shawn:

The decision to make it a Mitacs project was integral. That is what expanded the reach and breadth of what was possible, but it has also shown the importance of supporting emerging researchers, including the kinds of mentorship and guidance that both the sector and academia can offer in those situations. The other was the recommendation from Mitacs themselves to have an

academic lead who was not also supervising one of those students, which ended up becoming M.E. [Luka]'s role. Those two things have been completely integral. Of course, without those decisions, the project would still have gone forward. But it wouldn't have been able to grow to what it has been. We wouldn't have learned as much as a group about the centrality of relationship building when doing research and the need for local specificity. Of course, it was necessary for Canada Council and Canadian Heritage to have geographic reach, but it was more specific than that – especially with what Clare was saying about the North.

Gabriel:

I would go back to the genesis of this project as well, and the decisions that we took at that point. What was critical for the success of this project was the decision to focus on diversity: regional diversity, including opportunities for collaboration outside the usual relationships and networks; diversity of researchers and participants; diversity of research methods. Secondly was our out-of-the-box thinking about which organizations had the capacity or interest in growing their internal capacity for impact measurements in future for their region, and for the sector at large. These were two key components contributing to the decision-making and design of this project: diversity and internal capacity in the sector.

Clare:

I am hearing a lot of points that I would like to reiterate. But certainly, that decision to accept the Mitacs recommendation to have an Academic Coordinator who was not involved in supervising or mentoring any students was pretty critical to the project. I can honestly say that at the outset, I'm not sure we understood all the complexities of the project as it unfolded and how that kind of coordination role was key. Another key decision point was formulating this group, with funders, as a governance and advisory group [see Figure 1, below]. I wasn't totally clear on the value of it at the beginning; I wasn't sure what this group was going to do – and certainly wasn't interested in more meetings for the sake of meetings. I know there are some very knowledgeable researchers within this group and people who have a lot of context, but the way the group was able to check in and provide guidance to the project really ensured that it was grounded in communities and networks, which was the strength of the group, and its grounding in practical processes. There were key interventions and support that were needed to enlarge the project.



Figure 1: Governance structure for Research in Residence, (c) Sokoloski & Luka

Liz:

The two that come to mind have already been mentioned. I will expand a bit more on the question of equity, diversity, and inclusion, for example, when we were selecting students. We pushed to make sure that we had researchers who were more representative of the population including Indigenous and Black researchers. We were considering the representation of different groups, but also at a regional level. That was important for us as a provincial funder at the table; there needed to be a certain amount of this work done in Ontario, and obviously, Canada Council and Canadian Heritage needed it to be national.

The design decisions about the governance structure were also important – I would love to hear Robin [Sokoloski]’s take on that because I can only imagine how much work it was to facilitate all that relationship-building. I felt like it was so well done, and I especially appreciated the opportunities for the funders to connect with the student researchers, and to meet the [academic] supervisors from the different institutions because so much of this is really about relationship building. The success of the project is based on the quality of the relationships that we built. All the decisions made to set up this governance structure, and the processes of meeting and then having funders connect with the [student intern] researchers, were really important decisions that affected the outcomes around the overall partnership.

Daniela:

I agree with what's already been said. But, when I think about some of the projects that have really moved forward, and where there was a bit more ease of implementation of the research, it was where the supervisor had a strong mentorship role and really supported the student, including providing connections to different communities and institutions. That's definitely a key measure of success so far. I do think we have to wait and see what the long-term impact and final outcomes of the research will be. Having a supervisor who is supportive and who has a good relationship with the student helps us to have a successful project.

Gabriel:

Another important point, especially for the funders, was the shift to being directly involved, including as coaches to the interns. Many of our research projects are by the book: issue a Request for Proposal, hire a consultant, and simply approve the methodology, then provide feedback by reviewing a research report. In this project, we were part of the group: we had the opportunity to contribute by building another type of relationship and to intentionally help the team build a set of skills and approaches to support larger-scope research initiatives.

ME:

There are different kinds of dynamics and relationships for each of you, but they connect. That's really interesting. I can confirm that for Robin [Sokoloski] and me, the behind-the-scenes consultation and coordination was a lot of time and effort, and Robin [Sokoloski] carried the heaviest part of that load. From my perspective, it was basically like adding a whole course to my workload that I'm not paid for – which is fine, because it was a pedagogical research project. Having done it once, we've learned several lessons about what we can do again, or another time in a different way.

Liz:

That's important: articulating the tension points around where our [funder] needs driving this research doesn't necessarily match up with the type of work or timing of academia. So, M.E. [Luka] mentioned that this was like adding a whole other course, but you made it work because of the nature of the research. In terms of resourcing, in what ways were you able to absorb this as part of your existing workflow where you're allotted a certain amount of time for research, i.e., how do we make it feasible for academics to collaborate in this way? What are the things we need to make visible so we know how to design these collaborations in a way that nonprofit funders and academia can collaborate in meaningful ways without overextending?

ME:

The most straightforward way to connect to academia is as a research initiative, particularly as a pedagogical (training) research project. It would still have to be done in different ways for different

institutions and different academics at different levels, depending on their particular circumstances – just as with funders and their needs. The other thing to be mindful of is that what universities recognize is funding. So, although I loved and appreciated being the lead academic on this, my university took note that there was no direct funding coming in from Mitacs. Thankfully, we also came up with a postdoctoral fellowship that came to the university, so that made sense for the university itself – providing a professionalization training opportunity for a postdoc – and, not incidentally, providing RinR with another way to evaluate the project itself.

Liz:

That's interesting: that the postdoc was also for the purposes of the story you must tell with your institution. That's part of this work.

Sharing Research Impacts

ME:

Next, I want to shift our attention to briefly look at the representation of the governance structure that Robin and I developed to reflect the organic nature of the conversations that we hoped would be generated through this process [see Figure 1, above], and to think about the specific research contributions each funder made as a result of this approach.

Clare:

This kind of governance structure is very aligned with Mass Culture's values, approaches, and organization in general, in trying to decentralize power, build networks and relationships and have more organic governance and structures to guide projects. And so, I think it did work well. I was able to interface with this group as an advisory, as well as with the [student] researchers we met in Ottawa [at the May 2022 RinR gathering]. More specifically, the work that Shanice [Bernicky] was doing on EDI came to Whitehorse because of the [Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council] grant, which the governance structure supported because it connected all of us in a variety of ways. We were all able to collaborate and work well. However, I'm not sure that we had enough in-depth discussions to understand what would have happened if the project had gone off the rails in some way.

Shawn:

I'm going on a little bit more of a creative exploration here: one of the things I've been thinking about in terms of visualizations is how we could render them three-dimensionally, to give them more depth and actual shape. My thinking here is informed by some work on diaspora; often, diaspora is thought of as having an origin point and that there's a one-way progression to an endpoint. But Nadine George-Graves (2014) talks about "diasporic spidering," thinking about the sort of web that spiders build. This generates many different nodes of connection. That scholar is talking about identity and community construction, but I think about it too, in terms of governance

and participation in these projects that have so many different individuals and communities and organizations involved. This demonstrates that even the governance model can be turned upside down and that there's no fixed centre.

Liz:

One key research contribution that I'm thinking about is that when we were in the process of selecting students, I remember Daniela [Navia] being very clear that we didn't have the right mix for prioritizing equity yet. Our priorities can so easily get swept away in the speed at which we feel like we must work, and we can make excuses. I really appreciated that push to wait and get the right combination together. There were also other key contributions such as the research expertise that Canada Council and Toronto Arts Foundation offered.

Clare:

Yes, I'd reiterate that: there was a variety of research expertise that was brought to the table by having people from different organizations working with different methodologies and awareness of different projects and approaches. Also, money.

Shawn:

I think that that's important, particularly because there's a real lack of awareness in the sector, that research takes money because it takes time and people need to be paid for their time. And, obviously, for the funders at the table, the number one thing we do as organizations is granting for artists and organizations. But one of the ways that money can become most effective and most impactful is by grounding that in research, in ways that are not just about informing our own programs but developing tools like the impact assessment frameworks – tools that can enable the sector itself to tell better stories about what they do and the impacts that they have. But that all takes financial investment.

Daniela:

Exactly, and I think the research also represents an opportunity for funders to make a contribution to the sector as a whole. That is, as funders that work directly with the sector, we have the opportunity to influence and support and enable practices for a broader kind of impact measurement, data collection, even the way people see impact and community. So, I think it's really important for us to share this project with the community to demonstrate that we've collaborated and worked with different academics, community representatives and arts organizations to develop something that can have a broader impact. The way I see it is our contribution was a seed contribution. But we really need to enable some growth and some expansion moving forward based on the methodologies that we've developed, as well as the establishment of different ways of doing more research. That doesn't necessarily need us to have oversight, but it does feed the work that we do.

Gabriel:

It's very important at this stage of the project to identify new or different communication and dissemination channels for this project, as I said at the beginning so that this project realizes the opportunity for a new generation of research researchers to emerge. We need to try to promote and present our reports in different ways, including among students and in academia. We presented a few weeks ago at York University in the MBA program, and they asked about the approach we used. It is crucial to build opportunities to share this work in the sector as well as in universities through a long-term dissemination plan, rather than just publishing a report on our websites.

Shawn:

One of the other contributions of this project that has been needed is educating our own organizations about this stage, that is, about knowledge mobilization. From an academic perspective, that's just part of research – it's not a separate thing – and there are many different ways to do that. It's not just that the researcher goes out and does a survey and some interviews, and then writes the report, and then the report lives on a shelf, but all kinds of engagement needs to happen. The process of sharing the work is reflexive, so that you learn things about the work. And it's iterative as you share it because it shifts according to feedback and multiple perspectives. Being able to demonstrate that sharing and using knowledge is not a separate thing from research – that researchers themselves are the ones to do that, perhaps with a communications person, and definitely with the community. There are so many other ways that the work is put out into the universe.

ME:

Great, thanks. Related to this, how do you think this project may potentially inform or change how your organization will incorporate a broader spectrum or a more diverse spectrum of impact assessment processes or research processes more generally? And does this help shift priorities within your institution to conduct this research? If so, in what ways?

Anonymous:

That's a really good question. I think that the process of engaging funders so actively is specifically to learn about how to shift our own practices. That is making me realize that I need to think through how I am mobilizing this work with our own research and evaluation team. I look at our organizational history of emphasizing measurement and evaluation for the purposes of monitoring and accountability as opposed to learning. This project and partnership really shift that. It takes a lot to shift institutional practices, but I hope this project will chip away some of the more instrumental things internally and provide our senior leadership team with ways to understand and rethink how we approach this work.

Planning for Strategic Impact

Clare:

Wearing my Yukon government hat, in terms of how this research and research processes influence the work that we're doing, it's significant. We were developing our ten-year creative and cultural industry strategy concurrently with the RinR research. Not surprisingly, one of the key action items is to establish baseline data to regularly measure, monitor, and report on the economic *and social* impacts of the creative and cultural industry sector. I know lots of people do this regularly, but we've long struggled for capacity. And, so often, our monitoring frameworks are very crude, just what we can glean from cultural statistics and those kinds of things. RinR has given us access to the kind of network, knowledge and information-sharing that results in more capacity to think more broadly and clearly about what we want to measure as civic and social impacts and how we might go about doing that in a manageable way. We have been working this approach into some of the funding programs we're developing and rolling out, and being clearer about how they will be evaluated and what the measurement frameworks will be. We've really changed our approach to that. For example, we are about to announce an Indigenous micro-grant program on Monday with the Canada Council for the Arts that uses this approach.ⁱⁱⁱ We have two other funds in development where we're really looking at how we measure civic impact differently. So, it's already having an impact on us.

Gabriel:

The best part is that RinR shows that we can work differently, changing our practice as funders to create opportunities to work in network and partnership with the sector: that is a concrete outcome. The qualitative impact framework we published a few years ago was great, but it is complex.^{iv} What this project allows us to do is to advance that framework in a way that works for the sector. That is important for the Council from an accountability and transparency point of view, to demonstrate the value of public investment, where the Council is more than a simple contributor. It also helps us to advance a better understanding of how public funding works, and to work with other funders to achieve those objectives.

Anonymous:

This may be a bit off-topic but one of the things I've noticed is that the research units in any funding organization need to contend with changes in leadership: to demonstrate the value of research as an organizational commitment. At this moment, that also means that I can't be sure what impact this project is going to have on my organization. I can say that it has had zero impact so far. Just this week, we were discussing metrics for impact and the measures were all purely numbers, not just in leadership, but the entire team. This was simple math about outputs – reporting on activity, not about impact. But because we are still in a situation where we have to report to a [specific budget jurisdiction], if they only want numbers, then that's what we are compelled to provide. So, while I'm not sure what RinR will do, I'm ever hopeful. While I think it might take a little bit of time for the project to be understood because of a change in leadership, I believe it can be looped into what we are already doing.

Shawn:

It's even more complex than that because – as I've observed about the sector more generally – there is still no understanding of how to integrate research into existing systems. Rather than thinking about specific outputs for a project, or thinking that research is an entirely new endeavour, it's more about how to integrate new knowledge into existing structures and processes. It takes us back to what Liz [Forsberg] was saying about how to steer the ship towards the future rather than fully changing course, which people will resist.

Daniela:

I'll build on some of these points about how complex the cultural shift is that we're talking about. When we're thinking about qualitative impact measurement in comparison with quantitative research, we require a lot more resources for a smaller group of people. That makes it inherently grassroots; it has to be done at a small scale, and it is very difficult to scale up to the level that we might want to have happen. But I think there are different ways we can get creative. There can be surveys, that can be collaborative initiatives, there can be participatory ways of collecting data. But qualitative research is very time-consuming, it's very resource intensive. And there's a human element to it that really cannot be overestimated. There are ethical considerations, equity considerations, and accessibility considerations that are much less straightforward to address, than with some quantitative research methods. So, in terms of the future, there's tons of work to do, and it's going to take a lot of [co-ordinated] effort from all of us, and from all the communities that we're supporting, to really try to advance this in ways that make sense. We will also have to acknowledge that we will not be able to make some of the advances we want to make in the short term.

Building on New Practices Internally and Externally

Liz:

In terms of sharing the learnings in our organization, sometimes we have internal learning sessions that the entire staff is invited to. RinR would be a great opportunity for our partnerships team to illustrate what we mean by partnerships and co-creating with other funders, nonprofits, and academia around the table. It's also a really good example of deepening partnerships beyond the transactional type of partnership we are often all involved in, where people will call a donation or grant a partnership when it's just a bilateral relationship dependent on funding transactions. What RinR shows is that our team approaches partnership in a collaborative, multi-stakeholder way. And these are values that Mass Culture has embedded in the organization.

ME:

We are also running several roundtables in various locations across the country, with the help of a SSHRC connection grant. This allows us to send student researchers, supervisors, funders, and

organizations to towns other than where the work took place, and to test out the impact assessment frameworks – and methods – that the researchers used.

Shawn:

It would be interesting to host public town halls with the organizations that are participating in RinR or other projects like this, with the researchers talking about their learning so that others in the sector could learn more about their own potential for research. That opens up the learning process to more people as it's going on, so it's not solely at the end that we report on what we have learned, but that there's a kind of ongoing serialization of learning alongside the organizations that are going through the process.

Liz:

I love that, Shawn [Newman]. That's a really great opportunity to share. I'd love to hear more about how the arts organizations involved felt about what it's like to collaborate with academia. Just to build a greater kind of awareness of those opportunities, including how to engage Mitacs in conversations about the opportunities they have for funding in the sector.

Clare:

I totally agree that more organizational network sharing and growth would be great. The other thing that we might have done differently, and we only know this in hindsight, is how we matched the student researchers with organizations. We did a big call-out to generate interest. And then we worked with the researchers to let them take their pick. And sometimes it seemed like a good match. And sometimes it didn't. This is something that we could have been more intentional about, particularly by being clear with the organizations about what their commitment and expectations were and taking more of a hands-on role in that. Also, several organizations weren't matched to researchers, so it may have seemed like there was nothing for them afterwards.^v

Liz:

I have a really great example from another partnership that we're engaged in with Robin, where we have a protocol for maintaining relations. This is the data for equity partnership, where part of our objective was to provide data equity training for two organizations so that they would be more able to collect social demographic data. Part of their process included phone call outreach with organizations, but then once an organization signed on, there was a letter of commitment. And while I'm sure you had something like that, it sounds like that may be something that needs to be looked at, again, in terms of being clear about expectations and commitments. And of course, like we're learning along the way, in terms of what we could do next time.

Robin:

There is so much learning there, for sure. Mass Culture is definitely interested in playing with different models. That's something that's already come up in [Mass Culture's Mitacs postdoctoral

researcher] Laurence Dubuc's work (see also Vol. 8 No. 2 (2023)), who has been interviewing and talking to the researchers and others involved.

Along the same lines, I am interested in better understanding where the value of this research is in academia. Something I am interested in doing in a future iteration is to reach out to different academics and offer the student researchers an opportunity to share their research with panels of academics and give them that exposure within academia as well. This first year was a whole lot of learning, and so much focus had to go into making sure the researchers were supported. That will continue. But now that we have learned so much, I want to ripple that out. The next iteration will build on engaging arts organizations and the academic supervisors even more.

ME:

Absolutely, from an academic perspective, we are just beginning to build more standard academic opportunities – through the SSHRC connection grant as well as through conference presentations and the opportunity to develop articles for this special issue. There are ways in which we can think ahead for the next time.

Liz:

Now I am thinking about how this might need to be resourced differently in the future. What areas of work could have used more people power or more dollars? Where did people feel overly stretched? And are there things that we missed that should have been resourced? And what are the different sources for resourcing this? We relied on a combination of funding from OTF, Canada Council, Canadian Heritage, Mitacs, and SSHRC. How can we build on that?

Shawn:

That takes us back to governance, and what to do differently there. Finding ways to have folks from the community, and not just funders, to be part of how we guide the research projects could be useful. Because, as funders, we may know what we want to know, but another question to ask is, what does the sector want to tell us? What did the public want to know; what did these organizations, the artists, and communities involved want to tell us about impact? Having more of those folks involved requires more resources, they will need to be paid for their time and input.

Anonymous:

One of the things that surprised me a bit was working with the Department of Canadian Heritage. There was a bit of a revolving door of who was involved in the Funder Advisory. Obviously, that's an organizational thing; there's no value judgment about that. But continuity is important to build trust in the team. Of course, things happen and rotating people through helps spread the word. And that's fine. But that needs to be balanced with having continuity to help see the evolution of the project more clearly. Catching some folks up at a later stage also means that we could be losing particular perspectives, knowledge or expertise that might have been really important.

ME:

Yes, that's true – particularly as they are coming from a very complex set of backgrounds and accountability to provide feedback into a key funding source.

Daniela:

This goes back to Clare [Daitch]'s comment about how we were figuring some things out as we went along. And that the roles and responsibilities shifted depending on what was needed. Some mapping could be done about who some of the key types of folks are to be involved in future, including the different capacities the project could use, and whether and how deeply folks want to be involved. Is there a way to really lay that out from the beginning? Of course, there's always going to be different interests. There might be some funders that just want to be informed about what's happening, versus some funders who can play a more active role in the project. And that could be determined from the beginning so that it's also clear to people coming into it. This is who's involved. This is what the role will be. This is how we're going to work together.

ME:

This is one of the things about emergent scholarship and research: while a working model of governance and operations is helpful, including "job" descriptions, it's useful to be able to respond and shift things that aren't working. That notion of continuity compared to fresh eyes, and then different degrees of commitments within a project, are classically the navigations that need to happen in any multistakeholder project. It's been so interesting to see how these became apparent throughout of the project.

Daniela:

I also agree with Shawn [Newman]'s comment about an advisory. As someone who works in a funding organization, the term advisory refers to a community voice. I don't think that we were a community voice, we were more of an oversight group. I don't think we could call ourselves an advisory in the way these are meant to bring in perspectives from communities that are not already embedded in institutions. If that's the goal, then we should have different people in our advisory and there could be some oversight. There can be a project team. There can be other roles. Plus, I do think that the length of the project needs to change. We were working within the Mitacs structure. The length of time it actually takes to do a project like this is much longer and requires more resources than what was dedicated at this stage. So, we will definitely have to come up with a more robust resourcing plan for the project to scale up.

Liz:

I want to come back to the first thing that Daniela [Navia] was speaking about, being more transparent about decision-making responsibilities, including the flow of funding. "We All Count"^{vi} has a really great tool to map out the flow of funding, the flow of information, decision makers and how decisions are made in the relationship between all of the players. And that would be a really

great exercise to go through in future iterations of this project. It could be transformative. You could do it after the fact to help reflect on the project, but the intention of it is to shape the project so that it addresses issues of power, decision-making, and the flow of capital throughout.

Clare: ^{vii}

Just a couple of final comments as we wrap up. The developmental evaluation process we used was really good in principle. In practicality, like the timelines generated by the terms of the Mitacs grant, the challenge was that the project stretched beyond the time that the developmental evaluation was funded. So, we continued to develop after the evaluation had been completed. So that kind of limits the value of that process; it's not the full scope of the RinR project and all of its connections.

I also want to reiterate how clear it is that we all understand what it has taken to establish and maintain new and older relationships: time, commitment and effort. The project has fed me, and it definitely makes me feel less isolated as someone who works in a remote location because we had access to all these interesting collaborations and networks and sources of knowledge or information. So that does feed me and bring me joy, but it also takes that time, commitment and effort.

Shawn:

Because of when my involvement started, and still being relatively new to working on this side of the arts sector, versus being an artist or being in academia, I hadn't quite understood just how narrow the concept of research is in the sector. And so, I didn't adequately describe or pitch this project to my own organization in terms of why it's important to our organization. As a result, while folks in my organization have said that it's nice for you to participate in it, because we're sitting at the adult table with other funders, there hasn't really been any other active support for the project. I've given so much of my time to it, in part, because we weren't putting any money into it, and I wanted to make sure that we were contributing sufficiently to benefit from the project. With that said, because I come from academia, and I am not always in an academic setting, the opportunity for me to work with graduate students is just incredible. And I really want more of that. Helping, mentoring and supporting them is more than just training new researchers for the sector. It's also been really invigorating for me as a professional in the field.

Moving Forward

It is clear from the above discussion that RinR generated ways for the participants to become better together at identifying, nurturing, and sharing a broad array of impact assessment frameworks and measures that can more robustly demonstrate the civic impact of the sector. As Luka (2022) and others have previously shown in relation to the culture sector, this requires commitments to developing impact measures addressing aesthetic and creative impacts, social and environmental impacts, accessibility, governance and business approaches, as well as the ways in which sense-

making and knowledge-sharing play out in the field. As Mass Culture works towards the development of RinR 2.0 and related projects, the lessons of the first iteration continue to evolve. This includes sharing information about how to leverage funding and other limited resources in the arts sector to generate matching funds from Mitacs, or how to collaborate on a knowledge dissemination grant from SSHRC or other academic funding sources. Efforts to broaden the definition and practices of research in the field are already bearing fruit. Of course, the research is shared at academic conferences, in scholarly journals such as this one, and through presentations in the community. And, as the thoughtful engagement of this roundtable demonstrates, the funders involved became more skilled at deep partnerships and more comfortable about finding ways to continue to train and engage with emerging sector professionals. They also became more skilled in helping colleagues who may be a little more narrowly focused or set in their ways to expand their shared horizons. But the sector itself is also being subtly reshaped through the ways that the funders, arts organizations and the student researchers at the heart of the project continue to produce tools, datasets, frameworks and related materials that are directly applicable to the sector. Most tellingly, it is evident in the ways that everyone keeps talking, reflecting on, and iterating with each other, and with the communities that generated the knowledge involved.

ⁱ For more information, visit: <https://massculture.ca/research-in-residence/>

ⁱⁱ Please see the videos, graphic renderings, text-based reports, and outputs from the project's research and roundtables on the Mass Culture website (<https://massculture.ca/research-in-residence/>)

ⁱⁱⁱ See <https://yukon.ca/en/news/new-funding-program-indigenous-artists-and-cultural-carriers-available-january-1>

^{iv} See <https://canadacouncil.ca/research/research-library/2019/12/qualitative-impact-framework>

^v Note: The RinR team shared these learnings with hundreds of organizations in a variety of ways at the Arts Service Organization conference organized by Mass Culture in Toronto, January 2023, at the national research network gathering of national, provincial/territorial, and municipal arts councils organized by Mass Culture and Canada Council for the Arts in June 2023, and at RinR roundtables across the country, in part as a response to this discussion.

^{vi} Visit <https://weallcount.com/2020/07/24/introduction-to-the-funding-web/>

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