



**Future
Arts
Centres**



**Most Significant Change:
Getting Excited About
Evaluation**

July 2024



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This report describes the **Most Significant Change Action Research Group** facilitated by Future Arts Centres between June 2023 and January 2024. It explains the Most Significant Change evaluation approach, the benefits and impact of the Action Research Group and what we learnt about the value of arts centres. All quotations are taken from stories either shared by participants as part of the evaluation of the Action Research Group or collected by participants.

What was the Action Research Group and how did it work?

In its first year as part of Arts Council England's National Portfolio, Future Arts Centres created and supported three Action Research Groups. These all brought together a group of 11-12 peers to explore an area of arts centre practice. The three groups covered **Collaborative Commissioning**, **Inclusive Recruitment** and the **Most Significant Change** evaluation methodology that is the focus of this group.

The aims of the Action Research Group were to:

- Help members understand and apply an adapted form of the Most Significant Change methodology within their evaluation and learning work
- Explore how Most Significant Change can support organisational or programme development
- Help members understand and articulate the impact of their work

The membership of the group exemplifies the diversity within the Future Arts Centres network, with organisations of different scales and focusses. It included arts centres in England, Scotland and Wales, urban and rural locations and arts centres serving very different communities.

Organisations taking part:

- **Aberystwyth Arts Centre**, Aberystwyth
- **Brewery Arts Centre**, Kendal
- **Cambridge Junction**, Cambridge
- **Jacksons Lane**, London
- **LEVEL Centre**, Rowsley
- **Lighthouse**, Poole
- **Lyth Arts Centre**, Caithness
- **MAST Mayflower Studios**, Southampton
- **Pocklington Arts Centre**, Pocklington
- **South Hill Park Arts Centre**, Bracknell
- **The Albany**, London





The Action Research Group met five times between June 2023 and January 2024, with two sessions in person and three online. Members also delivered work in their own organisations training others in story collection, and leading reflection sessions.

The programme included:

- Training in Most Significant Change techniques for a senior member of staff from each organisation (provided by Mark Robinson of Thinking Practice)
- Training of story collectors within each organisation
- Collection and approval of up to 10 stories within each organisation
- Facilitation of reflection sessions in each organisation – often including teams, leadership teams and boards
- Peer reflection session on experience of the training and facilitated discussions
- Workshop on the use of Most Significant Change for organisational development and strategic planning

What is Most Significant Change?

Most Significant Change (MSC) is a participatory, qualitative evaluation approach. It was originally developed by Rick Davis and Jess Dart and has proved a valuable and adaptable tool for many evaluators. It is particularly useful when evaluating people-orientated projects and services where it is important to hear what people feel in their own words, rather than asking them to squeeze their experiences into pre-determined boxes labelled with either your own or funders' set of prescribed outcomes. It can complement other evaluation data, including quantitative data, to add to the richness of the picture considered.

MSC is a collaborative and non-hierarchical participatory way of identifying what has the greatest significance for people involved in accessing, delivering, and funding services - what matters most to all those involved, and why. The technique uses 'stories of change' as data, collected with and analysed by project stakeholders through a process of shared discussion. By actively listening to stories from those directly involved in the work in some way – as audiences, participants, artists, team, partners and funders – it provides a valuable addition tool for learning organisations, responding to the challenges of the survey fatigue many people feel, and the complexities of evaluating personal, relational work.



The process shared via the Future Arts Centre Action Learning group has four stages:



PROJECT DEFINITION

- Decide what you want to evaluate or learn more about, or if you want to frame your questions in a more open way
- Consider which groups or individuals do you want to hear from
- Identify how will you identify potential story tellers to ensure a range of experiences and voices
- Involve the people you need to get on board to support the work

STORY REFLECTION

- A group of stakeholders - eg a management team, board, or project partners - discussed the stories and what they take from them
- The group identifies key themes, learning points and implications for future activity
- Projects can hold several or many discussions and identify patterns and differences emerging
- Reflection can happen at different levels or parts of an organisation – eg teams selecting a smaller number of stories for consideration by a board of trustees.

STORY COLLECTION

- Trained staff or volunteers invite people to share their stories of change and record the story – in writing, video or other form
- Use interviews to explore what changes have come about as a result of involvement and what matters most to the storyteller, and why?
- Informed consent is key: every story is approved by the storyteller before sharing

FEEDBACK AND DISSEMINATION

- Learning from the reflections can be analysed and synthesised to inform future activity, or to shape arguments and advocacy for areas of work.
- Conclusions are disseminated as widely as possible within an organisation or group and externally, including those who shared their stories.
- Stories can be complemented by other types of qualitative and quantitative data
- Final reports can draw together strands from the stories, reflections and other data

For those sharing a story, the process is often valued because it provides:

- Time and space to reflect on their experiences
- An opportunity to articulate something that's happened to them or that matters to them
- The chance to be listened to, in their own words, and to be heard
- A sense of connection to the person interviewing them (and perhaps the organisation or project)

For those collecting and reflecting on stories, the value often lies in:

- Hearing directly from people in their own voices not via a survey
- Shared learning across a team, organisations or project
- Greater understanding of the experiences of audiences, participants, artists etc
- Informed improvements to ways of working



Why did Future Arts Centres focus on this approach?

Future Arts Centres chose to focus on Most Significant Change due to the potential value of:

- Understanding what impact arts centres have on their users, artists and partners
- Finding appropriate ways to describe that impact
- Finding ways to evaluate impact that avoid ‘survey fatigue’, and that can capture the ‘essence’ of arts centre practice

These were especially important at this moment because arts centres were faced with changing audience/participant behaviour post-pandemic and a growing awareness of the potential social, cultural and well-being benefits of arts centres. This was combined with an ever-increasing need to make the case for investment into the arts to a wide range of potential supporters and investors.

“The reality is the arts industry needs to justify everything what we do, rightly or wrongly. These changes in macro environment, and the increased necessity to convey our impact have driven a need for us to have a more effective way of evaluating.”

In addition, there was an increased awareness of the importance of developing evaluation methodologies that reflected the shift towards co-creation and participant or community voices shaping priorities. Some arts centres, such as ARC, Z-Arts and Old Fire Station Oxford had also begun to embed different types of story-based evaluation into their work, and felt the approach had great potential if it could be spread more widely.

The approach fits well with the Evaluation Principles set out for the sector by the Centre for Cultural Value recently

- Connected – Transparent, Aware, Shared
- People -Centred – Empathetic, Many-voiced, Socially-engaged
- Beneficial – Committed to learning, Ethical, Applicable
- Robust – Rigorous, Open-minded, Proportionate

What impact did the Action Research Group have?

Participants were positive about the impact of the Action Research Group, with all respondents to a survey feeling more confident in understanding users' perspectives, and all planning to use the technique in the future to some degree. Stories were collected from participants which supported these findings and gave more insight into specific areas of impact.

As part of evaluating the process, stories were collected from participants, and three reflection discussions held. The themes which all felt were especially important included the peer group as a confidence-boosting community that provides validation at times of change or risk-taking. Time out from the pressures of the daily workload was also clearly vital to people, as was remotivating people about their value and the value of their work. (Of course, these all mirror what arts centres can do for their communities.)

It was also felt that the stories showed the importance of such support and encouragement via skills development, at a time when the sector risks losing capacity, skills, and energy. The iterative nature of change – often coming in small steps rather than single 'big bangs' – was also noted across the stories.



EMERGING IMPACT:

QUOTATION FROM A STORY OF CHANGE SHARED BY A PARTICIPANT:

Increased confidence
in and enthusiasm for
qualitative evaluation

“This is the first time I’ve been excited about evaluation in such a long time. It feels like something’s finally clicked for us – a richer, wider picture for us across our programmes. We weren’t getting that before for pre-designed questions, based on pre-determined outcomes. It didn’t feel valuable. We weren’t capturing what MSC allows us to now – organic, natural conversations that were happening across all programmes already, that’s the real, rich learning. Now we have a framework to capture conversations that were naturally happening, and we can use them in a far more powerful way.”

Staff motivation and
understanding of
value/impact of their
arts centre

“Staff are really on board about the process, which has given renewed enthusiasm to how we talk about our work. It’s a huge contrast to the data-driven evaluation we’d been using... I can see that’s given staff much more job satisfaction, as people pause to consider about people’s experiences more, and how they’re a part of that.”

Increased
understanding of why
arts centres matter to
people and how they
use them

“It’s revealed a lot of cross-fertilisation of projects – more people than we knew are engaging in more than we really realised, and that’s been encouraging. But it’s also showed us that there’s lots more work to be done, like missed opportunities when people are ageing out of the youth programmes”

New or renewed
interest in the
possibilities of
evaluation as a tool
for organisational
learning

“Ultimately, it gives such a richness of data. MSC really shows the impact on someone’s life. It’s not just me that’s seen this, but it was really shown through the reflection panel which consisted of our senior management team. So, say, the Head of Finance and the Head of Ops – people who wouldn’t ordinarily engage in that level or type of evaluation – they got to hear about the impact of the work we do. It was eye-opening for others to see the pay-off, and the whole pay-off beyond money. The Board, who are voluntary, are usually working at a higher, strategic level, so they often miss out on the real-life effect. But MSC let them experience that.”

Potential for future
influence on
organisational
planning
and strategy

“Probably the biggest impact has come through people thinking much more about what we do as an organisation. We used the stories in our vision planning – it flipped everything from ‘what do we think we do?’ to ‘what do other people think?’. And we’re not guessing, we’ve got concrete stories and examples.”

Over 150 people in the organisations have been trained in story collection by those taking part in the Action Research Group, which has helped spread thinking about evaluation and impact across organisations. For most organisations, future use is likely to be project-based, due to the time-intensive nature of the process. Some described the process as not yet effecting the strategic decisions being made, but supporting ideas which emerge from review of programmes. The additional richness of the data to that captured in more quantitative ways is highly valued, and for some is leading to new approaches and adaptations of other evaluation and monitoring tools:

“MSC has been transformative in our understanding of project impacts. We are developing a CPD model for teachers around co-creation and we will be gathering stories from all partner schools to inform how we shape the CPD. We have also discussed using MSC for staff annual reviews.”

“We are planning a hybrid of wider organisational story collecting and project-specific. We are also building it in to a funding bid as an evaluation method with a partner organisation who are resident in our building. We have already used stories in reports to funders and in funding bids.”



MAST AUDIENCE
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All quotations from stories
shared by participants

Adaptations to the model

Some participants adapted the model to their particular situations and constituencies. Cambridge Junction work with young people with a range of complex needs, for whom verbal and written storytelling are not always a good fit. They experimented with observing behavioural responses to a range of pictures and videos of the participants throughout the project. They also adapted questions, reframing to invite responses to questions such as: how do you feel in this picture, and how do you feel now? They also partnered with a parent/carer who could monitor authentic responses from the participant and note these down as prompts when gathering a story from a participant.

LEVEL works with learning disabled people, including young people, so adapted the technique to their community. This involved reframing questions, using flashcards and looking at past and future storyboards, as well as ensuring informed consent with families and carers. Some people were described as 'living in the here and now' which can make reflection on past changes more challenging so bringing in other data – photographs or quantitative data was helpful.

Training was done in a variety of forms, including notes, in person sessions and one-to-one discussions. One member of the group created a 15 minute training video.



Challenges and learning points

There were some challenges to employing Most Significant Change in the arts centres represented in the Action Research Group. These included:

- Condensing interviews into stories in a user-friendly format and length – writing up in a way that is faithful, even powerful but not over-long takes practice and more guidelines on this would have been helpful
- More ‘mundane’ seeming stories and those without immediately obvious implications for actions were harder to reflect on for some people, but these less ‘transformational’ stories may also contain learning. Encouraging people to notice small details and read into the stories based on their perspectives and experiences can assist with this. More time on training around facilitating the group reflections would have been useful.
- Getting the timing right for story collection and reflection (especially to fit in with the Action Research Group timeline)
- Finding time to train storytellers and for them to practice
- Potential unconscious bias in the selection of storytellers, which could potentially lean towards the positive or avoid particular groups – this worked best when tackled directly by inviting less-familiar people to share stories

Learning points for participants included:

- Being clear on expectations from using Most Significant Change to gain commitment from senior management and boards
- Being clear on the likely follow up from the interviews and the reflections, including light touch meetings where things could be explored in person
- The need for stories to include enough detail about the change – especially the before and after – and about the storytellers and the scale of organisations
- Allowing enough time for the process, as it can feel time intensive before people see the value of stories as a mechanism for evaluation, and time is in short supply, especially given mandatory quantitative reporting
- The importance of building confidence to ‘manage upwards’ especially in larger organisations

What benefits did participants identify to the Action Research Group approach?

The Action Research Group format designed by Future Arts Centres is based on peer learning and sharing of experience. In this case it also included a training element, with an aspect of ‘train the trainers’ so that the key skills of Most Significant Change could be cascaded within organisations. The format was generally seen as successful.

Themes identified from the stories shared included:

- Being more able to embed a new approach because the group gave them time and headspace to reflect and experiment
- The positive, collaborative nature of the peer group experiences
- Confidence being boosted by being able to test ideas, challenges and questions with peers outside of their individual organisations
- Increased learning because of the variety of the group – people at different stages, in different roles and working in different scales and locations
- A good level of challenge and support being facilitated within the group

“The most meaningful thing was having time, and time to learn. As a collective, we were learning together; as a cohesive group it was easier to share, challenge, learn and talk together. I would go away and reflect on my own, but it was the practice and support of learning together that was so valuable. It was an empowering process, to learn new skills and to want to share with other professionals. I’ve taken that same culture of research and learning back into my organisation.”

Quotation from stories shared by participants



What did we learn about the value of arts centres?

The relationships people have with arts centres are personal ones – with staff, with artists and with other people taking part or attending. Often what people value the most are the people and the support they get from them, which over time builds their individual and community cultural confidence. This is often linked, though, to the creative skills people share, the opportunities created for people to develop, and the facilities arts centre buildings can make available to communities. Other key themes from the stories included the need to make the case for arts centres more confidently, the funding required for high quality work, partnership working, inclusion and welcome.

The ripple effect of arts centres

“The stories were strong, but they told us things we already knew. So, we reached out to others: we made a cold call to a frequent booker, users of the café, resident organisations, community partners. They were the most interesting. This wasn’t just things we knew, it demonstrated connections happening that we didn’t know about.”

“We’ve been able to capture a broader sense of belonging. We’re hearing about wider ripple effects and impact we weren’t registering before. Stories about a young disabled person in one of our programmes are also telling us about the confidence the family has in that young person – for them to get public transport for the first time, or to make friends... but also their parents observing that and being more confident in their child.”

Partnership working

“The support we have received has given us the space and confidence to develop ideas. Before working with [them], we were using ad-hoc space when and where we could, and without much support. Dealing with disadvantages, parts of our community found it difficult with cultural and language barriers in these spaces. It is not about brick and mortar for us, but the relationship that creates memories, builds loyalty and has an impact on people. We feel that it is a house for the community, a permanent and recognizable space, to gather, to be together.”

Welcome & inclusion

“For me, this arts centre is a second home. This is really important. It’s a place where I can ‘loiter with content’, and spend a day just being in the space, engaging with art if wanted, or just hanging out, reading and enjoying a coffee. I feel welcomed and relaxed just being here.”

Cultural confidence

“I wasn’t raised in a musical or artistic family particularly. Before I moved to the area music just wasn’t accessible to me at this range of quality and availability on my doorstep ... The intensity of the experience is fantastic. It’s given me agency and confidence in what I like musically. It’s bolstered my confidence to say I like certain types and styles of music, and to meet others who also like it, it’s OK to like it! I’ve had my arts education at the Arts Centre.”

“I think the most significant thing is seeing [my son’s] confidence and keenness to join in. I don’t really know what they do in the group, but I know that he is relaxed when he comes out and the friendships he has made have helped him feel more relaxed and normal.”

Next steps for Future Arts Centres

Future Arts Centres have used Most Significant Change as part of their own evaluation and reporting, collecting stories from participants and involving members, funders and partners in the reflection discussions. They will continue to adopt this approach in the future. It has been especially valuable to Future Arts Centres as an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation, enabling a fuller description of the impact against Arts Council England's Investment Principles than might otherwise have been achieved.

In 2024-2025 Future Arts Centres will run another Action Research Group centred on Most Significant Change, with a new cohort of 12 arts centre leaders. This report will be updated in the light of their experience and learning. Future Arts Centres will also continue to share information about Most Significant Change with its members and into the broader cultural sector.

We will consider offering further training and resources if there is demand, so if you would like to register your interest please email christine@futureartscentres.org.uk

Some tips for people interested in this approach

We are confident that Most Significant Change is a valuable approach to qualitative evaluation, and can sit usefully alongside other approaches, as well as on its own. If you are interested in it, here are some tips for making a start.

1. Be clear about why this is the right time for your organisation to invest in collecting and reflecting on stories
2. Be clear whose voices you most want to hear and design your project accordingly.
3. Aim for learning, not comfort – this means including people you know less well or who might have more challenging stories to tell you.
4. Adapt the process to your own situation
5. Remember this approach – like any other – takes time to embed so start small and see what works for you, rather than diving in for a whole organisation approach from the off
6. Make sure you facilitate the reflection sessions well, inviting discussion of negatives and failure as well as positive impacts
7. See how others are using Most Significant Change, and how it sits with best practice in cultural evaluation by checking out the useful links on the next page

Useful links

[The Story-Based Evaluation and Research Alliance](#)

[Old Fire Station Storytelling Evaluation](#)

[Centre for Cultural Value Evaluation Principles](#)

[Deep dive into Rick Davis and Jess Dart's Guide to Most Significant Change](#)

Credits

Written by Mark Robinson, Thinking Practice



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