Article 4: Evaluating TiE

After fourteen years with CragRats (my how the time flies), and now joining Collingwood Learning, I find myself saying things like 'well, we can do the things we have always wanted to do now!'. So we sat down and took nothing for granted – the established ways of doing things we had learned. From creative design, to logistics, to marketing, how we communicate to our customers, we have thrown out a lot of our previous learned behaviours and in many areas made things either better or simpler for all concerned. It's a fantastic feeling to be in this unique position.

But when it comes to evaluation of TiE work, I always felt things need to be a damn sight more complicated than they were! Our little industry had managed to create a situation in which we had supplied a form of evaluation and measurement which was neither particularly valid nor beneficial to ourselves or our clients. It's almost as if we have educated a lot of our clients into assuming this was the done thing, which, I suppose, it was.

What do I mean? Well, for those of you reading this who have not used TiE before, the norm tended to be that the company would hand out sheets at the end of every performance / workshop for students to fill in. This was usually a set of questions with Yes / No / Not sure answers, or other multiple choice answers. There then followed a box where students could write a comment about the event – the most important thing they learned etc. These thousands of sheets were then taken back to HQ and processed into a report. The report would usually share basic facts about the tour – numbers of schools, students etc, and then break down questions into a percentage answer e.g. '98% of students could identify the term peer pressure after the performance'.

Sounds OK? Well... yes and no. It depends what you want to learn. My feeling is that all 'happy sheets' actually do is tell us, in a very basic way, whether the session itself met the learning objectives set. No bad thing in itself, and great for keeping a team on its toes. But does it measure in any way a change in attitude or behaviour over time? No. I also questioned the logic of clients going to great expense paying for every student to be evaluated when surely a sample reflective of the audience we are reaching would give exactly the same results? Does the company itself learn anything from a set of results that reads 97% positive, 98% positive, 97% positive etc? Of course the students enjoyed the show – they were missing French! How could it have been better? Now I could learn something from that.

There was another thing that really grated on me. If we were evaluating ourselves, how could this be balanced? Would a company really put in a critical comment from a student or teacher? Well, perhaps a few, but not a lot.

Of course, talk about this with a professional evaluation and research company and they would probably laugh. And so I did, and yes, they did. It's the reason why a lot of clients with the budget use external companies to do far longer term, qualitative evaluations of the theatre in education company that they employ. But there's the problem – money. Clients are usually stretching their budget, begging, borrowing and stealing pots of cash from all and sundry to get their projects off the ground, so passionately do they believe in this form of learning, and they are right to. And they have to evidence this spend. So surely we should be helping them evidence it in a way that is really valid and good value.

I think this is where the distinction between 'research' and 'evaluation' comes in. We can't promise the world, but we can easily evaluate effectiveness in a more robust way. I also really want to know how I can improve the quality of the learning experience from one year to the next, not just keep my clients happy.

My approach now is to view every project we deliver as being an evaluation project in itself. From the very start we agree a hypothesis – 'delivering X messages using theatre in education will achieve X'. Then we put the building blocks in the place, or quantitative data – target audience, schools, numbers, script, workshop, teaching resources, curricular links, booking process, delivery etc. Essentially all the things you are buying from us, which we can supply as a matter of course. This is all combined into an extensive document for our client as the first half of the evaluation.

The second half is the bit we can't do. Qualitative evaluation. The reason we can't do it is because qualitative evaluation is about people *impartially* analysing responses to questions that are open, not closed. So we've partnered with an independent evaluation and research company. They produce either a qualitative questionnaire, or run focus groups, both before and after the live intervention, with sample groups of students reflective of the wider audience the project reaches. Then they carry out an independent analysis of the results they receive and produce a qualitative report based purely upon their own insights into the differences in attitude, knowledge, and behaviour pre to post event – the distance travelled by the students. It's not statistical, but analytical. This forms the second part of the evaluation.

The result? Without going to great expense, we can produce a report which provides all the qualitative and quantitative data a robust report needs, delivered in an impartial way. Then at last I can sit down with my Horlicks on an evening (OK, red wine), and read something of real value to me and my client.

For more information about our approach to evaluation, please don't hesitate to contact us.

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