**The value of culture: economics, diversity and understanding in the 21st century**

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Discussions about the value of culture have a long and varied history, but it is only in recent decades that an approach which privileges economic data has come to prevail. This has most often involved measuring the effects of the cultural sector on the economy using spending-measure techniques, for example by contribution to GVA or through economic impact studies, but recent years have seen efforts to broaden the scope through cultural satellite accounts as can be seen in Finland, Canada and most recently the USA (MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, FINLAND, 2009; MCCAUGHEY, 2014; NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS, 2013). There has also been an interest in developing national cultural indicators that draw on large-scale data and reach beyond the economic to other areas where big data can be captured and used. (SCOTT, 2014; UNESCO, 2009).

The debate about cultural value over the last twenty years has arisen from a sense of the limitations of an approach narrowly focused on economic and statistical indicators: limitations in terms of technical issues, certainly, but more importantly limitations as a way of thinking about and capturing cultural value. The Australian cultural economist David Throsby has been particularly influential in seeking to broaden the meaning of cultural value for economists (THROSBY, 2001). Cultural economics takes us into territory much larger than the economics of culture alone. The use of economic valuation techniques such as contingent valuation for capturing the value people attach to their cultural experiences, as well as to non-use values arising from the availability of cultural facilities that they do not themselves partake in, has made significant progress (BAKHSHI & FUJIWARA, 2015; BAKHSHI, 2009). These economic methods for the evaluation of non-market goods have in recent years been joined by others that link changes in subjective wellbeing to their income equivalents (FUJIWARA, 2014). These developments offer real potential but their ability to capture the whole value of cultural engagement is constrained, not least by their concentration on perceptions by individuals. Broader welfare benefits that accrue to society, rather than as private goods, cannot be made visible in this way.

These methods constitute an important response to measures of value that focus exclusively on economic benefits, but they do so within a specifically economic model and one that reduces cultural value to straightforward economic and statistical indicators. In 1830, the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham saw value as genuinely commensurable through the simple measure of utility, which for him would enable comparisons between the value of different activities:

The value of these arts and sciences…the value which they possess, is exactly in proportion to the pleasure they yield. Prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry. If the game of push-pin furnished more pleasure, it is more valuable than either. (BENTHAM, 1830)

Much of the case for arts and culture today has rested on a not dissimilar assumption that value articulated through one measure might suffice to identify the value of what are in fact multi-faceted fields of activity. Cultural value is not an absolute where the challenge is to find the right ways of measuring it. It is a contingent construct whose meanings change over time, linked as it is to changing discourses, above all those which surround policy.

That is why some cultural economists, most notably Throsby, now see measuring the impact on the economy and using economic valuation methods as constituting just two elements in a larger basket of methods (THROSBY, 2001; THROSBY & HUTTER, 2008). Economic value is increasingly recognised as only one part of a larger sense of cultural value, even if there is less agreement about whether this larger conception can be satisfactorily articulated in economic terms. Indeed, economic impacts (the economic effects of arts and culture), economic value (capturing the value of arts and culture through economic valuation methodologies) and cultural value (the value of arts and culture, whether or not drawing on economic notions of value) do not necessarily fit together but occupy different, albeit overlapping, substantive and conceptual spaces.

The limitations of narrowly economic approaches had become evident by 2012 when I was appointed as Director of a new project on cultural value launched by the UK’s Arts & Humanities Research Council. (For its final report see CROSSICK & KASZYNSKA, 2016)[[1]](#footnote-1). The origin of that narrowness of focus was not to be found in the use of economic statistics and methods themselves but, rather, in the objectives that drove the search for ways to articulate the value of culture. These objectives, in the UK and more broadly, were primarily focused on making the case for public funding of the arts. The intention was to influence and drive policy in a governmental world increasingly dominated by the approaches of New Public Management, targets and audit. But these are not the only possible relationship of evidence to policy, and an alternative would be to use research to provide the understandings that might serve to inform policy but which would not necessarily conform to it. In the UK and much of the western world it was the former which prevailed and the case for the arts was made through arguments that it was believed governments wanted to hear.

These were primarily benefits to the economy but also included contributions to other policy priorities relating to social inclusion, crime, urban communities and so on. The case was made through methods that would meet governments’ expectations: which meant being quantitative and able to fit into wider models of economic cost-benefit analysis that shaped allocation of government expenditure. This approach reinforced a tendency to start from what could be counted rather than to ask what we’re interested in and how best to evidence it. Here lies the seductive attraction of using simple quantitative indicators: the success of art in prisons is tested by re-offending rates, effects on the economy are tested through economic impact studies, and arts education in schools by narrowly-defined standard attainment, when the real benefits in all these areas are known to be so much more complex. Furthermore, these instrumental arguments for the arts were mostly about economic and social objectives that could be achieved by other means, and the case for the arts rarely rested on rigorous analysis that compared outcomes with other ways of meeting the same objectives. An alternative approach, one that began with what arts and culture could irreducibly, and maybe even uniquely, do was rarely taken.

What happens if we liberate our inquiries by deciding that the driver for understanding the value of culture is not to make the case for public funding? One result is that we immediately embrace the far more diverse ways in which people engage with culture. For a start there is the variety of locations – not just purpose-built cultural infrastructure such as galleries and museums, concert halls and theatres, but also small-scale spaces such as art or design studios and small live-music venues, institutions such as care homes and prisons, as well as while travelling, at home and through the virtual space of the interne. The home, in fact frames most of our engagement with film, music, television, craft, literature and video games as well as digital online cultural activities. And virtually all of this is commercial or amateur. Enlarging the focus to include commercial, third-sector, amateur and participatory culture shifts analysis from the conventional focus on the publicly-funded. It also forces us to ask more about the digital transformation of cultural experience, not just access to commercial culture through streaming and downloads, but increasingly the co-creation of content as digital platforms, social networks and online niche communities converge and reveal major structural shifts in how culture is produced, performed and experienced.

In seeking to understand and value culture in these broader terms, we free ourselves from the imperative to make arguments for the publicly-funded part. As researchers and as cultural practitioners we need to understand the difference that culture makes, before we ask the secondary, albeit important, question about why some of it should be funded from taxation. Publicly-funded culture then assumes a more interesting significance, embedded in an ecology in which the commercial, publicly-funded and amateur support each other, with public subsidy enabling key parts of that ecology to function (HOLDEN, 2015).

If we are to broaden our focus in this way to embrace the different means by which people engage with culture, we need also to broaden our perspective on the potential benefits, reaching beyond the narrowly economic and beyond the standard measurable outcomes that often dominate in other spheres of benefit. (The paragraphs that follow offer no more than a brief summary of some of the key arguments that are set out more fully, and with references to the research literature, in the report CROSSICK & KASZYNSKA, 2016, pp. 42-118). With respect to the economy, we may need to look beyond economic impact, where results and methodologies are open to serious criticism (STERNGOLD, 2004; SEAMAN, 1987), and more to other benefits. The way a broader arts and cultural environment supports the creative industries is one, recognising that all too often advocates elide the two and assume that the connection is proven. Another invites us to see arts and culture as part of a wider innovation system, shaping a population that is challenging and creative, and also generating spillover mechanisms that link arts and culture, the creative industries and other parts of the economy. And the part played by a lively cultural environment in creating the conditions that attract talent and investment to a country and, above all, a city. These all seem so much more important for the economy than is shown by economic impact assessments and economic size assessments.

A similar enlarging of vision is needed for urban benefits, where too much emphasis has been placed on regeneration through new infrastructural investment in concert halls or galleries and through the encouragement of creative and cultural quarters. This regeneration of places is usually accompanied by gentrification and the rise of the ‘experience economy’ where outsiders come for the buzz, the cafes and the shopping. A corollary of this is, however, the disruption and exclusion of communities as those who live there, and those who produce there including most involved in creative production, are forced out by rising property prices and rising rents. The very forces that helped shape the cultural buzz depart and the experience economy is what remains. The difficulty in finding long-term consequences of major culture-led regeneration projects has been underlined by attempts to evaluate the European Capital of Culture programme (GARCIA & COX, 2013). In contrast, smaller-scale cultural assets seem to have a more positive effect on neighbourhoods and communities. Small commercial, community and participatory arts – such as design studios, small music venues and community arts groups – seem to have more sustainable benefits, and may constitute a more balanced and organic path to regeneration (STERN & SEIFERT, 2013).

When it comes to the benefits of arts and culture for health we need to focus less on measurable financial savings from precise clinical therapies that speed recovery from physical health conditions, important as these are. We need to focus, instead, on the use of arts engagement to deal with mental health problems including those that inhibit recovery from physical conditions; the use of art and design to produce better healthcare environments; community arts interventions to improve social inclusion and mental health; and the benefits of engagement for older people as well as for those living with dementia. Turning to arts education in schools, we find that it is regularly claimed to improve attainment in standardised tests. The evidence from the US and the UK is unconvincing on this, with any improvement marginal at best and often virtually non-existent. There is extensive evidence, on the other hand, of its impact on the factors that underpin learning and that have been shown to be improved by arts education, factors such as cognitive abilities, confidence, motivation, curiosity, problem-solving and, of course, the imagination and questioning that are fundamental to both wider learning and the needs of the future workforce. But improvement in standardised attainment itself is not confirmed by the many studies that have been carried out.

While broader sources of value such as these across so many areas of economy and society are less easily captured through simply indicators, all are susceptible to rigorous analysis even if those rigorous analytical methods are not necessarily derived from economic or other quantitative methods. This methodological point also applies to the capacity of arts and cultural engagement to shape reflective individuals and engaged citizens. The report of the Cultural Value Project explores at length the ability of arts and culture to help shape reflective individuals, facilitating greater understanding of themselves and their lives, increasing empathy with respect to others, and helping an appreciation of the diversity of human experience, cultures and people. A key element is the role of aesthetic distance (‘this is not real but it feels like reality’) in enabling consideration of challenging dimensions of one’s own life and social existence. Meanwhile, separately but connected, there is the evidence that arts and culture help produce engaged citizens, promoting not only civic behaviours such as voting, joining civil society organisations and volunteering, but also helping to articulate and fuel a broader political imagination. Cultural engagement works in part by helping translate abstract notions into narratives on a human scale and does so in an open and non-didactic fashion, working obliquely, forcing us to reimagine and disturbing our assumptions.

In its consideration of these issues of reflectiveness and empathy, the report draws on research across very diverse topics. These include the journey towards desistance of offenders in prison that is prompted and developed by arts and cultural activities which open up uncertainty and a sense of options in a prison world where only narrow certainty exists; the way discussing Oscar Wilde’s parable *The doer of good* made doctors confront their own assumptions about what it means to do good and the difficult behaviours to which that can lead them; the humanising of residents with a dementia in the eyes of their professional carers through engaging together in craft activities in care homes; psychological studies showing subjects becoming more empathetic through reading literature; the dozen UK museums which put on displays that successfully made people question their assumptions about disability; or, for damaged and vulnerable people with little history of reading, finding themselves prompted to reflect on their own experience and identity by reading aloud to each other in small groups. As far as civic behaviours are concerned, there we find examples as different as, on the one hand, addressing the issues of climate change through open and non-didactic arts engagement which can enable people to change behaviours; and, on the other, the graffiti and lightshows through which young people in Britain have challenged urban planning decisions in their own neighbourhoods. With more space I could develop these examples a great deal further, as the report and its references to the underlying research do. The key issue is the existence of a substantial range of research that both analyses and evidences the way arts and cultural engagement can shape reflective individuals and engaged citizens.

We have come far from quantitative indicators and necessarily so. Such indicators are often no more than proxies for other more complex phenomena. Academics might recognise an analogy with the search for indicators of research quality (such as citations and journal impact factors) when the real quality can only be assessed through peer reading and evaluation for which these indicators often serve as very poor proxies (ESPOSITO, 2017). If we’re trying to capture the wider value of culture, we need to learn not to reach for inadequate proxies but to be open to a much broader range of methods and of evidence. And with that range we must also question the assumed hierarchy of evidence and methodologies. The current hierarchy privileges quantitative data because of the ideological power of measurement, and it privileges the experimental method and randomised controlled trials in delivering secure knowledge. The understanding of the difference that arts and cultural engagement makes to individuals and to society may include establishing causation but causation, in contrast to the more common association between variables, can only be demonstrated in very precise situations and in respect of very precise questions. We can sometimes establish causal connections through simplifying variables, most necessarily in some kinds of clinical arts therapies, but even with health this is possible in only a small minority of interventions. Yet the experimental method and the randomised controlled trial have come to be regarded as the gold standard for evidence in areas for which they were not devised. The equal validity of methods drawn from other disciplines, not least those in the arts, humanities and qualitative social science, must be recognised if we are to make progress in undertaking research and evaluation in these areas (For an extensive discussion of methodologies (CROSSICK & KASZYNSKA, 2016, pp. 120-150).

Progress also requires that we address two fundamental but neglected themes in considering the value of culture. The first is the relative absence of longitudinal studies – do the supposed benefits to individuals or communities of cultural engagement last over time? As far as personal experience and engagement is concerned the information captured is often immediate, as people participate in a cultural experience or as they emerge from it. The big questions that then arise are whether the benefits last or need regularly topping up by further experiences to sustain the effects identified, as well as whether the character of the difference that is made changes over time? There is evidence that while the immediate impacts of a cultural experience may be affective, to do with emotion and performance, the longer-term impacts are cognitive as participants reflect on their experience (REINELT, 201?). And what about the very long-term association of cultural engagement with beneficial health outcomes as demonstrated by a variety of studies in the Nordic countries even after controlling for a range of socio-economic variables such as occupation, education and income? (BYGREN ET AL, 2009; KONLAAN ET AL, 2000)

The second and even less explored theme concerns the quality of the cultural product and the cultural experience. How does quality relate to the various sources of value that we may identify – are the effects on reflectiveness, innovativeness, health or civic engagement, for example, related to the quality of the work and its experience? The need to identify what we mean by quality makes that an even more challenging question to research but, even in a world of diverse cultural experiences where concepts such as the canon and the popular are of declining relevance, it is one that we surely need to ask.

Where has my argument about the way we understand value reached? If we want to capture and articulate the value of culture, then economic and other statistical indicators have a fundamental place when they are deployed in the service of understanding those areas where they have something important to tell us. There is, nonetheless, so much more in the analysis of cultural value that we need to research and the narrative that we need to present, and this means going beyond the economic benefits to embrace the many other areas enumerated earlier in this article. In so doing we must overcome the marginalisation of experience in discussions of cultural value, a marginalisation that seems to derive from suspicion of experience and with it, perhaps, suspicion of the phenomenological methods by which experience is often captured (KASZYNSKA, 2015).

In order to broaden our questions in the ways that I have suggested, then we also need a much wider range of methods and sources of evidence to find answers to these questions. In exploring the value of arts and culture we need to embrace a range of arts and humanities approaches and with it qualitative forms of evidence, such as ethnographic, hermeneutic and arts-based methods, as well as the construction of case-study narratives drawing on qualitative and phenomenological evidence. The analysis of meanings and representations, clarification of discursive practices, exploring historical parallels and experiences, alongside the close reading of texts, images, performance and language – these are amongst the many characteristics that arts and humanities approaches can contribute to the mix of methods. And without them there is a great deal that will not be understood. These are disciplines for which methodological rigour is just as important as in the sciences, but it is a different rigorous approach which in many aspects in better suited to the complexity of both the activities and the responses that characterise arts and culture.

There are striking examples from work funded by the Cultural Value Project and which I can only mention here. These include the meticulous reading and re-reading of transcripts of the discussion at reading groups organised by The Reader Organisation, drawing on approaches from literature and linguistics (DAVIS et al, 2014); the use of a visual matrix to provide non-verbal stimulus for focus groups discussing public art in the town of Ilfracombe (FROGGETT et al, 2014); close ethnographic observation to establish young people’s responses to environmental initiatives through the arts (HAWKINS, 2014); an examination of experience and identity formation in an elderly people’s improvisatory dance group using somatic ethnographic methods (WINTER, 2014); getting young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to edit a film of their activities to implicitly reveal what the value was to them of involvement in a drama group (THOMSON & PRINGLE, 2014); a comparison of discourses around museum practice in late-19th and late-20th-century Manchester (REES LEAHY, 2015); and understanding the multi-layered meanings of a Sikh war memorial outside Brighton through historical and literary analysis (ASHLEY, 2014)

Case studies, carefully analysed and presented in this way, create understandings that would have escaped a large-scale trawl for data across many settings. Rigorous case studies are crucial for evidence and analysis, notwithstanding the difficulties of scaling up such approaches. This, surely, is one of the great strengths of what the arts and humanities bring to society’s knowledge and understanding. Extrapolation from such case studies might be the first step towards creating both scalable and sensitive evaluation methods, enabling us better to understand the underlying processes and those aspects which are shared across different contexts. The challenge is then to bring together the different types of result that emerge from such studies because many do not have a national scope and nor are they scalable to achieve one. This is where the arts and humanities disciplines have much to offer because case studies are a central element in their toolkit.

Can we pull this variety of results together in single indicators? No, not in the complexity sketched here. And why should we want to do so? If we’re looking for the value associated with specific cultural organisations, programmes or initiatives, we must turn to multi-criteria approaches. For these approaches devices such as the balanced scorecard, developed for use in business but now deployed more broadly, exist to bring the different criteria together without losing their separate meanings (BOORSMA & CHIARAVALLOTI, 2010; REEVE & SHIPLEY, 2013; WALMSLEY, 2012). And when it comes to answers at the level of a country or of a city, then we need to explore the variety of benefits through a variety of methods. There is nothing wrong, surely, in recognising the breadth of culture, the breadth of experience and the breadth of value.

Once we’ve relaxed not our demand for rigour but how we recognise rigour, once we’ve relaxed not our demand for robust evidence but how we recognise robust evidence, we’ll be in a much better position to understand the value of culture in all its richness. This will not produce simple, straightforward answers because much of it is about complex interventions and complex experiences in a complex world where individual variables cannot be isolated or controlled. It will be a big step forward for the study of cultural value, and even more for how we use what we learn from that study, when we recognise the diversity and complexity of its many component parts.

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1. The full Report, along with details of the project itself and the variety of work which it funded, may be found at <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/research/fundedthemesandprogrammes/culturalvalueproject/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)