



Disconnected Bodies

# PEOPLE MAKE MEANING

ETHICAL AND USEFUL EVALUATION

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# ART WITHOUT DISCOVERY MOVES NOBODY

Disconnected Bodies: A social enterprise working to improve access to the arts, culture and heritage.

**Supporting innovative people and projects:** we help people choose, create, or take part in bold and brilliant arts experiences.

**Widening cultural access and democratising the arts:** the arts must remain a force for public good.

**Advising on cultural audience engagement and securing funding:** we work for those who most require the help; tackling industry gate-keeping and discriminatory practices to amplify voices.



## 19 years

Changing the face of cultural audience engagement and contributing our expertise to enabling more people to choose, create and participate in brilliant cultural experiences.



## 15 countries

Improving access to the arts and culture in 15 countries across the United Kingdom, Europe and Africa.



## 720,000 audiences

Reached in 2024. 375,000 being first time attenders.



## 2.1 million people

Engaged digitally in 2024.



## 8 national research projects

5 international research projects.



## 764 hours

Free advice provided in 2024.



“At DisconnectedBodies, we champion inclusive cultural access—empowering communities through bold engagement, free expert guidance, and equitable arts participation. Join us in transforming who the arts serve and how they connect us”.

- Pablo Colella, Founder

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# CULTURE: A CATALYST FOR TRANSFORMATION

At Disconnected Bodies, we believe in the power of arts and culture to catalyse real, lasting transformation in towns and cities.

This isn't just about regeneration; it's about unlocking the potential of place and people through a deeply rooted, locally led cultural strategy.

As an organisation that supports councils and cultural ecosystems across the UK, we help towns embed creativity at the heart of their development strategies.

Our approach recognises what we champion: that cultural participation fosters stronger, more connected communities, improves wellbeing, supports educational outcomes, and builds inclusive economies. With the creative industries contributing over £111 billion annually to the UK economy, investment in this sector isn't a luxury—it's a necessity for future resilience.

This kind of transformation isn't theoretical—it's happening. And at Disconnected Bodies, we exist to support councils to design, implement, and sustain similar cultural strategies. Whether through co-created public art, reimagined public spaces, or cultural programmes that reflect local identity and tackle inequality, we work side-by-side with local authorities to turn vision into action.

But we also understand the challenges.

COVID-19 reshaped the creative landscape, exposing systemic vulnerabilities—especially for freelancers, emerging artists, and underrepresented communities.

Our strategic advice doesn't shy away from these realities. It acknowledges deep inequities, and outlines a path forward that is both inclusive and justice-focused; mirroring our commitment to co-designing systems that elevate marginalised voices and redistribute creative power.

We've been able to demonstrate what's possible when a town embraces arts and culture not as an add-on, but as a foundation for change.

We're here to activate local potential, build cultural infrastructure, and centre communities in the stories they tell about who they are—and who they want to become.

Let's reimagine together.

# PRINCIPLES FOR MEANINGFUL EVALUATION

Evaluation is often treated as an afterthought, a funding requirement, a box to tick, or a final report to file away. But when approached thoughtfully, it can become a powerful tool for learning, reflection, and growth.

This document brings together four core approaches to evaluation that can support cultural organisations, projects, and funding bodies in creating practices that are both accountable and people-centred.

Careful practice, openness, right-sized approaches, and human connection are not separate steps. They are interconnected ways of approaching evaluation that reinforce one another.

Together, they shift evaluation away from compliance and towards reflection. They make space for complexity, for honesty, and for people. They remind us that evaluation is not only about measuring outcomes but about building relationships, creating understanding, and strengthening the work itself.

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# RETHINKING CAREFUL PRACTICE IN EVALUATION

Careful practice moves beyond the idea of perfection. Evaluation is rarely tidy, and insisting on flawless processes or data risks stripping out nuance and humanity. Instead, careful practice means paying attention: being thorough, making considered choices, and showing respect for context.

There is no single truth in evaluation. Funding bodies may ask for numbers, while artists and participants value meaning and stories. Careful practice recognises these multiple truths and holds them together, even when they conflict.

Methods are important, but they must be matched to the questions being asked. Surveys and scales can reveal patterns, while interviews and diaries capture depth. The strongest evaluations connect these strands so that numbers and narratives illuminate one another.

Careful practice also requires reflexivity. Evaluators bring their own perspectives, shaped by identity and lived experience. Acknowledging this positionality makes evaluation more transparent and more trustworthy.

Above all, careful practice is context-sensitive. A volunteer-led community project will not use the same methods as a large city-wide programme, but both can demonstrate care and attention in proportion to their scale.

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## **Beyond Perfection: A More Human Approach**

Careful practice does not have to mean rigid. It is less about creating an airtight process and more about asking: Am I being thoughtful, thorough, and fair in how I evaluate? In cultural projects, this means going beyond simply collecting data and leaving. Instead, it requires attentiveness to the people, places, and relationships that shape the work.

This perspective opens the door to a more humane kind of evaluation, one that balances structure with flexibility. Methods and frameworks matter, but they should never override the lived experiences of those involved.

## **Multiple Truths and Conflicting Perspectives**

One of the challenges of careful practice is that truth looks different depending on who you ask. Policymakers may want hard numbers, funding bodies might seek patterns of impact, while artists and participants often focus on meaning and experience.

True careful practice acknowledges these multiple truths and the inevitable conflicts that come with them. In fact, conflict can be productive. When different voices and perspectives meet, richer and more nuanced understandings emerge. Careful practice lies not in smoothing over these tensions but in holding them openly.

## **Learning from History**

The cultural sector sometimes treats evaluation debates as if they are new. In reality, questions about how to capture and interpret lived experience have been wrestled with for decades. Audience studies, cultural studies, and theatre research have long argued that there is no single, objective slice of truth when it comes to human experience.

What this history teaches is that careful practice is not about clinging to objectivity. It is about acknowledging interpretation, context, and the role of the evaluator themselves in shaping the data.

## **Methods: Matching Tools to Questions**

Careful practice also depends on choosing the right methods for the right questions. Quantitative data, like scales and surveys, can reveal patterns over time. Qualitative data, like interviews or reflective diaries, capture depth and meaning. The most powerful evaluations often combine the two, weaving numbers and narratives together.

But mixed methods only work when the data speaks to each other. Too often, organisations collect statistics on one side and personal stories on the other, without connecting them. A careful approach looks for how the numbers and stories explain, challenge, and enrich one another.

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## **Stories, Anecdotes, and Evidence**

In evaluation, stories are sometimes dismissed as mere anecdotes. Yet carefully collected stories can be among the most powerful evidence we have. They show how projects touch lives in ways that surveys alone cannot capture. The key is not to shy away from stories, but to gather and analyse them with care.

A single story can open a window into wider patterns of experience. Careful practice means recognising the value of these accounts while situating them alongside other forms of data.

## **Bias and Reflexivity**

No evaluation is free from bias. Every evaluator brings their own lens, shaped by background, identity, and lived experience. Careful practice requires acknowledging this openly, not pretending it does not exist.

Being explicit about positionality, who is asking the questions, why, and from what perspective, strengthens evaluation. It creates clarity and helps others interpret the findings with understanding.

## **Proportion and Context**

Careful practice must also be right-sized. Small organisations with limited resources cannot be expected to apply the same methods as large institutions with in-house evaluation teams. What matters is that the chosen approach is reasonable for the scale of the work.

Careful practice is also contextual. A rural project with a small audience may look very different from an urban programme attracting thousands, yet both can be evaluated carefully if the methods are aligned with the goals and circumstances.

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# OPENNESS IN EVALUATION

Openness is often praised but rarely enacted. Too many evaluations focus on glossy outcomes while leaving methods and decision-making in the shadows. Openness means showing the workings: explaining how conclusions were reached, acknowledging limitations, and being honest about what could not be captured.

This is not only about reports, it is about culture. When organisations value openness, it encourages staff and collaborators to reflect at every stage, creating safe spaces to share what worked and what did not. Evaluation stops being a marketing tool and becomes a process of collective learning.

Openness does not mean exposing people. Protecting confidentiality and safeguarding individuals is essential. But it does mean being clear on why choices were made, what information was included or excluded, and what challenges were faced along the way.

Openness operates in layers. Some findings are best used internally, while others should be shared with funding bodies, peers, or the wider public. What matters is that decisions are made consciously, with a commitment to honesty wherever possible.

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## Showing Our Workings Out

In research, it's expected that methods are laid out clearly. Readers want to know how conclusions were reached. In evaluation, this openness is often lost. Reports skim over methods, skip over context, and focus on polished results. Sometimes this happens out of fear that readers will find the process dull. Other times, there's an active choice to obscure detail, especially when conflicts of interest or positionality come into play.

But when methods are left in the shadows, credibility suffers. Openness requires us to show our workings out, to explain not just what we found but how we got there, and to acknowledge the biases or limitations that shaped the process.

## Building Reflective Cultures

Openness is not just about documents; it's a behaviour. When embedded into an organisation's culture, it encourages reflection at every stage of a project. Teams begin to think about evaluation early, not just as a tick-box exercise at the end. This creates a safe space where staff can articulate both successes and shortcomings, and where accountability is shared across the whole team.

Such behaviours support more sustainable, resilient organisations. Instead of rushing from project to project, there is space to pause, reflect, and learn.

## Timing and Flexibility

The ideal time to build evaluation is at the start of a project. When evaluation is co-designed with stakeholders, it becomes iterative and flexible, able to capture unexpected outcomes along the way. But even when evaluation comes in later, openness can make the difference between a superficial report and a meaningful one.

Being open about timing, about what was possible and what was missed, is itself a form of openness.

## The Risks of Openness

For many organisations, openness feels dangerous. In a fragile funding environment, the instinct is to present only successes, to treat evaluation as marketing rather than reflection. Fear of losing future support or damaging reputation leads to defensiveness and silence.

There are also ethical reasons for withholding some findings. Protecting anonymity and safeguarding individuals must always come first. Openness doesn't mean exposing people, but it does mean being clear about why some information cannot be shared.

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## **Funders and Shared Responsibility**

Openness is not only the responsibility of organisations. Funding bodies have a crucial role in creating conditions where it is possible. Too often, they ask for numbers rather than insights, reinforcing the idea that evaluation is about counting rather than learning.

When funding bodies genuinely value reflection, including lessons from failure, it changes the culture. Organisations feel safer to share, knowing that openness will not be punished. It then becomes a collective practice rather than a risky gamble.

## **Layers of Openness**

Openness also looks different at different levels. Some findings are most useful internally, helping teams refine their processes. Others need to be shared more widely, with funding bodies, with peers, or with the public. What matters is that these decisions are made consciously, with a commitment to openness wherever possible.

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# RIGHT-SIZED APPROACHES IN EVALUATION: DOING LESS, DOING IT BETTER

One of the biggest pitfalls in evaluation is doing too much. More data does not always mean better insights. Right-sized approaches ask organisations to scale evaluation to the resources, the context, and the purpose. It is about focusing on what matters most.

This principle recognises the balance between accountability and learning. Meeting funding body needs is important, but evaluation should also serve the organisation itself. When evaluation is designed only to satisfy external requirements, it becomes superficial. When scaled appropriately, it can instead nurture deeper reflection and improvement.

Right-sizing is contextual. A national cultural programme may need a large-scale, multi-year evaluation, while a grassroots project may benefit more from simple, reflective conversations. Both are valid, as long as they are aligned with goals and capacity.

It is also about pace. Slowing down creates space for more voices to be heard and for learning to go beyond surface metrics. As Pablo Colella reflected in *Disconnected Bodies*, proportionate practice can help resist extractive demands and build healthier, regenerative cultural work.

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## Why Right-Sized Approaches Matter

Cultural projects are usually delivered under pressure, with limited time, money, and people. In these conditions, it's tempting to gather every bit of data possible, hoping it will prove value to funding bodies and stakeholders. But more data doesn't always mean better evaluation. Without clear priorities, evaluation risks becoming overwhelming, producing information that no one really uses.

Right-sized approaches ask us to focus on what matters most, to be selective, and to accept that not everything can or should be measured.

## Balancing Stakeholders and Learning

One challenge is the tension between evaluation for funding bodies and evaluation for learning. Funders often expect evidence of outcomes, while organisations want insights that help them grow and adapt. Right-sized approaches lie in striking a balance between these needs: delivering what is required, but not at the expense of useful, reflective practice.

This means being clear from the start about why evaluation is happening and who it is for. When organisations design evaluations only to meet external requirements, the result can be superficial "bean counting." When right-sized approaches are built in, evaluation can instead support deeper questions about purpose, practice, and future direction.

## Learning from Too Much and Too Little

Finding the right balance often comes through experience. Many in the sector recall evaluations that tried to do everything, only to discover that the results weren't useful to others. At the same time, there are moments when being deliberately expansive, exploring widely, following curiosity, and asking open questions can spark unexpected learning.

Right-sized approaches do not mean always doing less. They mean knowing when to scale down and when to stretch, and making those choices consciously.

## Context Shapes Scale

Scale matters. A city-wide cultural programme, funded with large sums of public money, may rightly require a detailed, multi-year evaluation. A small volunteer-led organisation, by contrast, may benefit more from light-touch reflection that strengthens internal learning.

Right-sized approaches recognise that evaluation should look different in these contexts. What matters is not how much data is collected, but how meaningful and useful it is.



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# PUTTING HUMAN CONNECTION AT THE HEART OF EVALUATION

Evaluation without human connection is extractive. It risks treating participants as sources of data rather than people with experiences and agency. Human connection places relationships at the centre of evaluation.

It starts with listening, not just collecting responses, but creating conditions where people feel safe and respected enough to share openly. This means valuing silence, unexpected answers, and perspectives that challenge the majority view.

Human connection also means sharing power. Participants should help shape evaluation, not just take part in it. For communities who may have felt used or ignored in the past, this is essential. Explaining why questions are asked and ensuring value is returned helps to build trust.

It also requires embracing outliers. Voices that disrupt the dominant narrative often point to blind spots or systemic issues. Rather than smoothing them away, human-centred evaluation makes space for them.

Finally, human connection encourages honesty about failure. Instead of hiding problems, it treats them as part of learning. Conflict, discomfort, and imperfection are acknowledged as realities of cultural work, not as weaknesses to be disguised.

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## Why Human Connection Matters

Evaluation without human connection is like a conversation without listening. It may capture words on the surface, but it misses the meaning behind them. Human connection creates the conditions for people to share openly. It builds safety, trust, and comfort, without which the answers we gather mean very little.

Human connection is also about listening in a deeper sense, beyond just hearing. It involves opening ourselves to experiences we might not expect, and being willing to sit with perspectives that challenge us. At its best, evaluation becomes less about ticking boxes and more about creating space for genuine relationships.

## Moving Away from Extraction

The cultural sector has a long history of extractive practices, where communities are mined for their stories or data, only for that information to be taken away without anything given back. Evaluation grounded in human connection challenges this. It requires evaluators to spend time in communities, to “hang out,” to build relationships, and to understand context before drawing conclusions.

This is not about swooping in at the end of a project with a survey. Human connection demands involvement from the beginning, embedding evaluation as part of the process rather than an afterthought.

## Sharing Agency and Building Trust

Human connection also means sharing agency. Instead of evaluators holding all the power, participants are invited to shape the evaluation itself. They are asked not just what they thought about a project, but what they think about the process of evaluation, and how they would like their voices to be heard.

This shift is especially important for marginalised communities, who often feel suspicious of evaluations that seem to serve only institutional needs. Being transparent about why questions are being asked, and ensuring that participants see value returned to them, helps to build trust.

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## Listening as Practice

Listening is one of the most powerful tools of evaluation rooted in human connection. Not just listening in order to respond, but listening to understand. This might mean sitting with silence, making space for reflection, and accepting that the most valuable feedback may not come in neat, report-ready packages.

Some organisations actively embed reflection into their work, carving out dedicated time for community conversations, collective learning, and shared decision-making. This intentional listening helps to avoid complacency and keeps projects grounded in real needs and experiences.

## Embracing Outliers

Human connection means valuing outliers too, the people whose voices may not fit the majority view, but who often hold crucial insights. Outliers can disrupt complacency, challenge assumptions, and highlight where systems are failing. Rather than smoothing over these voices, evaluation grounded in human connection brings them into the conversation.

Conflict, Failure, and Honest Learning

Human connection doesn't mean avoiding conflict or pretending everything went well. In fact, it encourages the opposite: acknowledging tensions, failures, and the complexity of outcomes. This requires courage, as organisations fear judgement from funding bodies or reputational damage. Yet honest reflection is what allows genuine improvement.

Talking openly about failure is part of this approach. Instead of treating failure as shameful, it can be understood as a valuable source of learning, for organisations, funding bodies, and the wider sector.

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# TOWARDS MEANINGFUL EVALUATION

At their core, careful practice, openness, right-sized approaches, and human connection are about alignment and integrity. They remind us that evaluation is not about perfection, but about care. It is not about polished stories, but about honesty. It is not about more data, but about scaling to what truly matters. And it is not about extracting from people, but about building trust and sharing agency.

When evaluation is approached with these values, it becomes flexible without losing focus, rigorous without being rigid, reflective without being indulgent. It makes space for conflict, imperfection, and learning, and it resists the pressures of superficial compliance.

Meaningful evaluation is therefore less about producing reports and more about nurturing relationships, slowing down to listen, and creating conditions for collective growth. It is not an optional extra, but an essential part of ethical, sustainable cultural practice.



## BOOK A FREE 30-MINUTE VIDEO CONSULTATION

Book a free 30-minute consultancy call and speak with Disconnected Bodies' Founder Pablo Colella.

We pride ourselves on offering free, no strings attached advice. Book a day and time that suits you then leave it to us to get you moving past sticking points and towards your goals.

**Don't want to wait? Give our team a call on 020 3633 7617**

