

# Tips for Healing-Informed Arts Education Initiatives: Evaluation

During the 2019-2020 school year, the Los Angeles County Department of Arts and Culture (Arts and Culture) partnered with Los Angeles County Office of Child Protection (OCP), Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health (DMH), and Arts for Healing and Justice Network\* (AHJN) to implement healing-informed arts education activities within select public schools. This joint initiative, *Creative Wellbeing: Arts, Schools, and Resilience*, is a starting point for establishing school cultures grounded in healing-informed care by providing arts-based student instruction, professional development, and community building activities.

Harder+Company Community Research joined the partnership as the evaluation team to capture the impact and lessons learned through implementation of the initiative during the pilot phase. This guide describes best practices for evaluating healing-informed arts education initiatives, specifically those delivered through online technologies.

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\*Formerly known as Arts for Incarcerated Youth Network (AIYN)

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## Evaluation Phases

Evaluation is an important component of program delivery as it provides opportunities for continuous learning and program improvement, as well as monitoring outcomes and capturing impact. Although various aspects of evaluation have traditionally been carried out in person, the COVID-19 pandemic required the *Creative Wellbeing* evaluation to shift an already complex program and carry it out entirely online.

Evaluations are typically divided across five key phases, thoughtfully designed to ensure the level of robustness, representation, and accessibility appropriate for the evaluation. Although some aspects of the evaluation process transfer seamlessly from in-person to virtual methodology, there are aspects within each phase that should be carefully considered when carrying out a virtual evaluation. The general evaluation phases are as follows:

- 1 Evaluation Purpose:** During this phase, you will want to gain an understanding of the program design and its operations and align it with the purpose/audience of the evaluation.
- 2 Planning for Data Collection:** Now that you have the evaluation purpose and research questions in place, you will need to develop a data collection plan that clearly identifies the evaluation activities, tools, and protocols that will speak to the research questions and capture the perspectives of multiple stakeholders. In a virtual setting this means thinking through how you will authentically engage stakeholders in data collection, while being mindful of their access to and comfort with technology, and other competing priorities.
- 3 Implementation of Data Collection:** After planning for data collection, you will conduct and implement the data collection activities. Data collection in a virtual environment can be challenging and requires evaluators to be innovative in their approaches.
- 4 Data Analysis:** Once all the data is collected you will need to clean and analyze the data, based on the research questions.
- 5 Reporting and Dissemination:** The final step is reporting on findings and sharing them with your target audience(s).

The following guide will take a deeper dive into each of these phases, provide critical questions to be asked during each phase, highlight specific best practices that surfaced during the *Creative Wellbeing* evaluation, and showcase considerations for conducting complex evaluations in a virtual space.



## Evaluation Purpose

During this phase, you will want to gain an understanding of the program design and its operations and align it with the purpose/audience of the evaluation – this includes formulating research questions to focus the evaluation and ensure findings are relevant and actionable. With most work being conducted almost entirely virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic, evaluation is no exception. This phase of the evaluation can be easily modified to a virtual approach through the use of virtual meetings, regular communication, and shared documents.

### Questions to consider:

- What are the program goals and how can progress toward these goals be measured?
- Who are the program participants and other stakeholders?
- Who is the audience for the evaluation?
- What do you want to learn from the evaluation? What information could be used to make the program better?
- What challenges will the evaluation face – including technology – and how will you address them?
- What is the estimated time and cost for completing the evaluation?

**Research Questions.** Healing-informed arts education initiatives have the potential to impact the wellbeing of students, teachers, and school cultures. Research questions should be thoughtfully formulated to simultaneously meet the goals of the evaluation, internal learning needs, and funder requirements. Data collection instruments should then be aligned to the key objectives of the research questions. For *Creative Wellbeing* this meant measuring changes around complex constructs such as mental health awareness and stigma, risk and protective factors, and applications of learnings (See *Planning for Data Collection for more information*).



**Capture Diverse Perspectives.** In a complex initiative like *Creative Wellbeing* there are often various participants who will experience and be impacted by the initiative in different ways. Conducting a [Stakeholder Mapping](#) exercise at the onset of an evaluation can help identify how an initiative's impact may differ based on participant type and shed light on the power dynamics the evaluation is embedded in. By identifying these aspects early on in the evaluation, subsequent steps (e.g., data collection, analysis, reporting) can be attuned to these considerations and designed appropriately to ensure all participants' needs are represented in the evaluation.

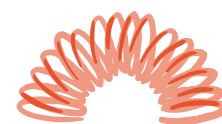


**Know Your Audience.** Evaluations are most effective when the evaluation approach and deliverables resonate with the target audience(s). At the onset of an evaluation consider having an intentional conversation with key partners about who the target audience(s) of the evaluation are and what they want to know. This includes understanding funder expectations and designing an evaluation that will meet the needs of multiple stakeholders. Throughout the evaluation, ensure data collection, analysis, and reporting are culturally responsive, relevant, and applicable to these audiences.

*Examples of questions to help define an evaluation's target audience:*

- Who will be impacted by the findings?
- Who will use the findings?
- How do we want to communicate findings to these groups?

**Flexibility.** Program implementation may need to change in response to shifting circumstances, which has implications on the evaluation approach. Ensure the evaluation approach is flexible enough to be responsive to evolving implementation and still meet the needs of funders. For *Creative Wellbeing* this was critical when the COVID-19 pandemic shifted the entire programming approach to a virtual environment. This led to changes in participants and programming. Despite the drastic shifts, the new data collection activities remained aligned with the research questions and overall purpose of the evaluation. Flexibility is also critical to ensure the evaluation approach is culturally responsive and inclusive of all perspectives.



## Planning for Data Collection

Now that you have the evaluation purpose and research questions in place, you will need to develop a data collection plan that clearly identifies the evaluation activities and tools/protocols that will speak to the research questions and capture the perspectives of multiple stakeholders (*you may have identified these through a stakeholder mapping activity*). In a virtual environment, a critical first step for planning data collection is examining what technology your anticipated participants have access to, when and where they will have access, and brainstorming the most appropriate ways to incorporate those into the evaluation data collection plan.

### Questions to consider:

- What data are already available and can be leveraged?
- Are control or comparison groups available to measure the outcomes or effects of the program?
- What types of data collection activities will help answer your questions? (e.g. interviews, focus groups, surveys, observations, participatory methods, secondary data)
- Will the virtual nature of data collection require any additional equipment/planning?
- What technology do anticipated participants have access to?
- What is the best timing for each data collection activity? Can early data collection efforts inform later ones?
- What level of data sharing agreements, IRB approval, or consent is needed?
- Are your data collection tools reliable and valid for the target population?

**Tool Selection or Creation.** The *Creative Wellbeing* evaluation examined how different participants were impacted by healing-informed arts education activities which encompass complex and nuanced constructs that are hard to measure. Where possible, review field literature to identify existing standardized tools that assess impact on your desired constructs in a way that is culturally appropriate for your target population. If none are available, create tailored tools, pulling from existing ones as appropriate, that include the critical questions needed to answer your research questions, test hypotheses, meet internal learning needs, and satisfy funder requirements. (*See tips below*)

Additionally, to paint a comprehensive picture of an initiative, consider including questions that capture data on how the various participants experienced the activities as well as how they were impacted by the content or activities. This information will be critical to consider if you intend to replicate or expand the initiative in future.

### Tips for constructing survey questions:

- Keep wording simple and specific.
- Use neutral terms/words in your survey to prevent biasing responses.
- Use consistent or standard response categories to make potential comparisons easier.
- Use different font and symbols for survey instructions or skip logic. Use clear language.
- Consider how the survey data will be entered and analyzed. Will items be easy to format into a database? Will they make sense as outputs? Are independent and dependent variables covered?

**Incorporate Mixed Methods.** The experiences and impacts of an arts-based initiative cannot be wholly captured solely through quantitative or qualitative data. When possible, evaluations should be designed using both quantitative (e.g., surveys) and qualitative (e.g., interviews) methods to gather comprehensive and rich data. Additionally, consider using both close-ended and open-ended survey items to allow participants to elaborate on their responses.

When evaluating initiatives that have several programming elements, ensure all data collection instruments contain a core set of questions to allow for comparisons across program activities and shed light onto differences in impact across participant and activity types.

Lastly, it may be appropriate to use different tools or methods to capture the same data across participant types. For instance a survey may be most appropriate for gathering data from educators on their experience, but it would be more appropriate to conduct a focus group with youth to discuss how they experienced initiative activities. Data collection plans should take these nuances into consideration.



**Pre/Post Data Collection.** Collecting data at multiple time points can be instrumental for demonstrating how participant's knowledge or behaviors changed as a result of arts education activities. If possible, consider collecting data from participants before the onset of any activities to capture baseline data and then collect the same data at the conclusion of initiative activities to assess how participant's knowledge or behaviors changed. For a portion of the *Creative Wellbeing* evaluation this was done through the use of pre-workshop registration forms. When participants signed up for a workshop online, they were asked various evaluation specific questions and at the conclusion of the workshop they were asked those same questions to gauge change.

If collecting pre/post data is not feasible or would interfere with your program design, consider using a retrospective pre-post survey to gauge how participant's knowledge or behaviors may have changed. Retrospective surveys are administered at a single time point (typically the end) and ask participants to self-assess their knowledge, skills, or behaviors from two viewpoints – BEFORE and AFTER participation. The responses can be then be compared to show changes in knowledge/skills/behaviors. For the *Creative Wellbeing* evaluation, a retrospective survey was used at the end of the professional development sessions to determine how participants were impacted by the content.

*Example of a retrospective pre/post survey question:*

On a scale from 1 (Not at all knowledgeable) to 5 (Extremely knowledgeable) how would you rate your level of knowledge about risk factors for youth:

Before training: \_\_\_\_\_ After training: \_\_\_\_\_

**Youth Data Collection.** Engaging students in virtual data collection is critical for an evaluation of a school-based initiative. Though capturing the student perspective is essential to understanding successes, challenges, and impact of a school-based arts education initiative, it can be challenging due to student's varying level of access to technology (i.e., computer or internet access), conditions where they have access (i.e., home environment or public WiFi locations), and numerous logistical challenges (i.e., obtaining district approval and parental consent). Low-tech methods for engaging students include gathering written responses to specific prompts or sending surveys via mail for students to complete.

Another consideration when engaging youth in evaluation is creating a safe space. Be thoughtful about who the youth you serve will trust as well as who should or should not be present during the discussion (e.g. teachers or parents). Start with icebreakers or other activities that build rapport and set the stage for open and honest conversation. Additionally, consider the various gender, racial, and ethnic identities, as well as lived experiences of the youth being served by the program when designing youth data collection activities. Some youth may be reluctant to engage in data collection. Approaching the task from a culturally responsive place is critical for ensuring a safe space is created for youth to share their insights and experiences.

Evaluators should work closely with program implementation staff to understand the most appropriate way to engage students in data collection. Planning for youth data collection and obtaining needed permissions early in the evaluation can help ensure the youth perspective is included in the evaluation findings.



# Implementation of Data Collection

After planning for data collection, you will conduct and implement the data collection activities. This includes recruiting participants, collecting the data, storing the data, and providing incentives as appropriate.

## Questions to consider:

- How can you ensure that participants feel safe and protected?
- Is the recruited sample representative of the larger group? If not, what steps can be taken to ensure you have a representative sample?
- What biases might you bring during the data collection? What steps can be taken to mitigate those biases?
- What virtual platforms would be most accessible and easy to use for participants?
- Are incentives needed to encourage and compensate participation? What incentives would be appropriate?

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## Virtual Evaluation Tools.

**Zoom:** With Zoom's sophisticated functionality, evaluation teams can use polls and the chat box to incorporate evaluation activities into programming. Zoom also has the ability to create breakout rooms with a smaller subset of participants which allows for rich, smaller group discussions. Through these functions, evaluation-specific questions can be incorporated throughout sessions to gather real time data and feedback from participants. Zoom also has a reactions function that allows participants to communicate or provide non-verbal feedback without interrupting the flow of the event through silent reactions such as thumbs-up or clapping emoji.

**Online survey platforms:** [Qualtrics](#), [SurveyGizmo](#), and [Google Forms](#) all have the capacity to create surveys and create basic reports. As programming has shifted to primarily virtual delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic, online surveys can easily be incorporated into programming sessions or sent to participants shortly after.



**Registration forms:** Software such as [EventBrite](#) and [Brown Paper Tickets](#) can be useful for gathering registration data (e.g., contact information of participants) as well as evaluation related data (e.g., demographic characteristics, counts). You can incorporate pre-survey questions and gather other evaluative data prior to program activities.

**Interactive programs:** Programs such as [Google Docs](#) or [Jamboard](#) allow for multiple users to interact with documents simultaneously, in a real time fashion. Virtual whiteboard programs like Jamboard also promote collaboration and ideation among participants. These types of programs can be helpful for gathering data and input through virtual group discussions. Jamboard also has the ability to keep responses anonymous which can be helpful for establishing a safe space for participants to share their experiences openly and honestly.

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**Timing of Data Collection.** It can be challenging to collect data from participants after an event, workshop, or training has ended, especially if the survey is distributed via email. Consider coordinating with teaching artists to carve out time at the end of the session to have participants complete a survey or provide feedback. If using Zoom, paste survey links into the chat box for participants to access. Incorporating polls or open-ended questions for respondents to answer in the chat box during the session could also be utilized to gather evaluation-related data.



**Incentives.** Educators, youth, and parents have many other priorities demanding their time and attention. If possible, offer incentives to thank participants for their time and data. Incentives can be monetary in nature (gift cards, cash, etc.) or can be tangible items (teaching materials, backpacks, etc.) Incentives in the form of e-gift cards can be resource saving, allowing gift cards to be sent to participants in bulk versus individually and not requiring postage.



## Data Analysis

Once all the data is collected; you will need to clean and analyze the data, based on the research questions. This step also includes sensemaking and preliminary data reviews to identify areas to dig deeper.

### Questions to consider:

- What is the story that is emerging from the data?
- What are interesting trends over time, within sub-groups or between groups? Compared to other groups of similar people? Is there anything surprising about the findings?
- Which comparisons will have meaningful results? Are there any differences in results by groups (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender) or by stakeholder types (e.g. teachers, students)?
- How do the data sources align with each other? How are they different from each other?
- What are some contextual factors that can help explain the results?
- How do your results align with widely-accepted beliefs in the field?

**Analysis.** Examining both quantitative and qualitative data trends by demographic or administrative characteristics is critical for understanding how different groups of people are impacted by an initiative. For *Creative Wellbeing*, data were examined by session, stress level, race, and role to assess any differences. If the sample size (see below) is too small to allow for comparisons across many categories, consider aggregating data into more broad categories to increase the stability of the data. Additionally, data analyses should ensure critical questions or requirements outlined by funders are adequately answered. Lastly, analyses should explore how participants were impacted by the initiative based on content delivery approach. If programming was delivered through both in person and virtual means, examine how participant impact varied as a function of delivery method. This will help you explore whether virtual programming had greater or lesser impact on participants than in-person. These data could also help inform how future programming should be delivered to each of the various participant groups.



Sample size is the term to describe the number of units (e.g., people, families, schools, etc.) that data were gathered from. For example, if 25 educators participated in a survey, the sample size would be 25.

**Include a Comparison Group.** Especially for new initiatives, consider collecting data from a comparison group – a group of individuals who were not involved with initiative activities but who closely resemble the individuals who participated in initiative activities. This will allow you to understand how the initiative impacted participants on key metrics and measures. Comparison groups can be used in evaluation when individuals are not randomly assigned to attend initiative activities. For *Creative Wellbeing*, educators who did not participate in activities were sent a survey containing the same set of core questions that *Creative Wellbeing* participants responded to. The responses of each group were then compared to examine if *Creative Wellbeing* activities had an impact on key constructs of interest.



**Sense making Session.** A sense making session is a collaborative process used to weave together various data sources and perspectives into a big picture narrative. Hosting a sense making session with the client and other key stakeholders can be helpful to confirm findings, gather additional context, and help interpret findings. Sense making sessions can be conducted in person or virtually. If done virtually consider using a second platform such as Google Docs to allow participants to simultaneously add content to a document while you discuss it. This will allow for real-time, iterative sense making amongst the group.

## Reporting and Dissemination

The final step is reporting on findings and sharing them with your target audience(s). In a virtual space, careful consideration should be given to how evaluation findings are communicated back with stakeholders.

### Questions to consider:

- What kind of deliverables resonate with your audience?
- Is the deliverable clear and accessible for your audience?
- Who will see the evaluation results?
- How will the results be used?
- How will you communicate findings that suggest the program did not have the intended impact?
- Which recommendations are feasible or should be prioritized?
- What is the best way to share back results with those who participated in data collection? Do these methods have technology access implications?

### Revisit Target

**Audience(s).** As you begin the reporting and dissemination phase think back to who you identified as your target audience(s) during the evaluation purpose phase. Ensure final reporting and deliverables are aligned to the needs and interests of the target audience(s) to effectively communicate the research findings.

**Communicate Back Results.** Sharing results back with key stakeholders (including those involved in data collection) is important for building trust and promoting transparency. Examples of ways to communicate evaluation findings with stakeholders include sharing back final reports with stakeholders or hosting learning sessions where findings and action steps are discussed.



### Design of Deliverable.

Customize the style and design of the evaluation deliverable with the target audience(s) in mind. This ensures the deliverable is accessible and resonates with the target audience(s). For an arts-focused initiative, consider spending time making the deliverable visual and aesthetically designed.

