

Arts Sector Research in Development: Participant Perspectives on a Community-Engaged Research Initiative

Jamie Gamble

Imprint Consulting, Canada

Robin Nelson

Museoception, Canada

Contributors:

Robin Sokoloski (MASS Culture) and Khiem Hoang

Abstract: Despite good intentions, academic research often reflects an extractive model and is not always seen as useful within the Canadian arts sector. Mass Culture is a non-profit organization that aims to bring together cultural workers and academics in support of collaborative research and better knowledge mobilization. To that end, their Research in Residence (RinR) initiative involved complex collaborations between the arts sector and academia to explore five applied research projects on a topic of shared importance to participants - that is, articulating the value of the arts through qualitative rather than quantitative measurements. To learn from the experimental research design, participants conducted a developmental evaluation with five lines of inquiry: benefits and effects, program design adaptations, values alignment, efficacy and potential, and knowledge mobilization and research engagement. The evaluation had three purposes: (1) to gather data and facilitate analysis of the key questions that the initiative was trying to understand; (2) to inform Mass Culture's implementation and adaptation of the initiative; and (3) to generate insights on principles and practices that could inform the design of future initiatives. This article considers the second and third purposes, outlining key lessons learned that shaped the initiative and/or should inform future projects.

Keywords: community-engaged research, developmental evaluation, impact assessment, arts and culture

Résumé : Malgré de bonnes intentions, la recherche académique reflète souvent un modèle extractif et n'est pas toujours perçue comme utile dans le secteur des arts canadien. Mass Culture est une organisation à but non lucratif qui vise à rassembler les travailleurs culturels et les universitaires pour soutenir la recherche collaborative et une meilleure mobilisation des connaissances. À cette fin, leur initiative "Research in Residence" (RinR) impliquait des collaborations complexes entre le secteur des arts et le milieu universitaire pour explorer cinq projets de recherche appliquée sur un sujet d'importance partagée par les participants : articuler

Jamie Gamble, Imprint Consulting jamie@imprintinc.ca

Robin Nelson, Ph.D., MMSt, researcher at Museoception robinnelson@museoception.ca

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Centre on Governance, University of Ottawa, 120 university, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1N 6N5

la valeur des arts par des mesures qualitatives plutôt que quantitatives. Pour tirer des enseignements de la conception expérimentale de la recherche, les participants ont mené une évaluation développementale avec cinq axes d'enquête : les bénéfices et effets, les adaptations de la conception du programme, l'alignement des valeurs, l'efficacité et le potentiel, ainsi que la mobilisation des connaissances et l'engagement dans la recherche. L'évaluation avait trois objectifs : (1) recueillir des données et faciliter l'analyse des questions clés que l'initiative cherchait à comprendre ; (2) informer la mise en œuvre et l'adaptation de l'initiative par Mass Culture ; et (3) générer des idées sur les principes et les pratiques qui pourraient éclairer la conception de futures initiatives. Cet article considère les deuxième et troisième objectifs, en exposant les principales leçons tirées qui ont façonné l'initiative et/ou devraient informer les projets futurs.

Mots clé : Recherche communautaire, évaluation développementale, évaluation d'impact, arts et culture

Introduction

Despite good intentions, academic research often reflects an extractive model where researchers gather information from communities, which is then interpreted and presented in publications that are inaccessible to those communities (Flexner et al., 2021). Community-engaged research practices involve partnerships between communities and researchers in an attempt to develop more mutually beneficial relationships (e.g., DePrince et al., 2022, Holden et al., 2022). In this context, research is conducted with and for communities. While there are many different approaches and names for community-based practices across disciplines, they share an interest in developing more responsible approaches to conducting research (London et al., 2022). In doing so, they can increase research impacts because they are more responsive to community needs and are concerned with the usability of research (e.g., Denner, 2019, DePrince et al., 2022). While the benefits of and need for community-based research practices are evident, there are significant challenges to implementation due to injustices embedded within the research, policy, and funding frameworks within which projects take place (London et al., 2022; Limes-Taylor & Esposito, 2019). Researchers must navigate power relationships to build relationships that will enable the community to benefit from the work (Hoover et al., 2019).

Community-engaged research projects can be initiated at the community level rather than the academic level. Within the arts sector in what we now call Canada, research already takes place in the community as arts service organizations (ASO) and others (e.g., funders) engaging in research projects. For some ASOs, research is seen as a particularly important tool for communicating the value of the sector to funders. Many organizations lack the resources needed to develop projects. As such, they work in collaboration with others, such as academic researchers, to facilitate better access to research. However, ASOs have faced challenges, such as a need to advocate for research design that is useful to them and the sector more broadly (Campbell, Evans & Wowk, 2022). Despite

challenges, collaborations with academic researchers can be useful in the development and documentation of specific operational and governance structures that can identify common ground, as well as articulate differences in desires, needs, and outcomes among group members.

Aiming to convene cultural workers and academics, Mass Culture is a “collaborative support organization that takes a community-based approach to providing diverse parties with the context and connections needed to enhance the equitable mobilization of arts and culture research” (Mass Culture, 2023). For example, their Research in Residence (RinR) initiative involved complex collaborations to explore applied research in the arts sector, considering a topic of importance to participants - that is, articulating the value of the arts through qualitative rather than quantitative measurements. As part of the project, Mass Culture collaborated with Canada Council for the Arts, the Culture Statistics Working Group (Federal-Provincial-Territorial Culture and Heritage Table), Ontario Trillium Foundation, and Toronto Arts Foundation. They received funding from Mitacs to hire six Master’s and PhD students to conduct five research projects in collaboration with arts organizations in partnership with an academic supervisor.

RinR is an example of a project initiated by specific members of the professional arts community to serve and support the broader arts community in its efforts to develop research acumen and practices with academic communities on an issue of shared interest. Measuring the value of the arts is a research focus for multiple groups, but governments and funders often focus on quantitative methods related to economic impacts (McCaughley, Duxbury & Meisner, 2014). As those involved worked to meet the community’s articulated need for qualitative frameworks, they navigated relationships and structures within both the arts and academic spheres to develop more responsive research practices. This paper reflects on the developmental evaluation conducted as part of the initiative to consider the lessons learnt about collaborative research projects in and about the Canadian arts sector.

Background

As described in Luka et al. (2023), Mass Culture and a funder advisory began discussing an idea for a project on arts’ civic impact in March 2020. To that end, Mass Culture successfully applied to Mitacs - a nonprofit national research organization in Canada that provides funding for student interns to conduct research in collaboration with an organization - for what became RinR. They proposed eight-month residencies where researchers worked with an academic supervisor at their university, an arts organization in their community, and the existing funder advisory to develop frameworks that would assist the arts sector in demonstrating its civic impact.

The project launched in Spring/Summer 2021 with an initial timeline of one year as outlined in Table one. Phase one reflects the initiative’s primary concern with first establishing a community of practice (Herne, 2006; Pyrko, Dörfler & Eden, 2019). The co-leads worked with the other participants (funders, researchers, academic supervisors) to develop a vision for the project, including a non-hierarchical governance model and guiding principles, alongside providing the researchers with the support needed to develop their projects. Phase two involved, in the language of academia, case

study or field research within the arts organization(s). Some initiative participants referred to this phase as “research residencies,” which calls to mind the arts residencies that are more common in the sector. Mass Culture released information about the researchers’ general area of interest - diversity and inclusion, Indigeneity, climate and sustainability, health and well-being - along with a call for interest to recruit arts organizations of relevance. After two calls, the students and co-leads selected appropriate organizations which then signed memorandums of understanding. Phase three involved coming together to share the arts impact frameworks developed.

Table 1: Initial Project Timeline

Activity	Time frame/ Deadline
Research Students hired	
Phase One - Learning Modules and Methodology development	2 months
Phase Two - Selection process & Researchers in arts institution	8 months
Phase Three - Present Qualitative Impact Frameworks	1 month
Evaluate Research initiative/ process	Throughout

Throughout this process and the research projects more broadly, the RinR participants worked to support the researchers. See Table Two for a summary of the key groups involved in the initiative.

Table 2: A Who’s Who

Group	
Mass Culture	The lead organization which managed and stewarded the overall process. Mass Culture staff, interns and members of their governance groups were all engaged.
Arts Organizations	11 arts organizations worked on a research initiative as part of the five individual projects
Funder Advisory	A group of 4 philanthropic and government arts funders who provided financial and in-kind support for the initiative, engaged in the overall design of the initiative and were a voice in the interpretation of findings.

Student Researchers	6 researchers from the following institutions: McGill University, Emily Carr University's Aboriginal Gathering Place, University of Winnipeg, Dalhousie University, and Carleton University.
Academic Supervisors	Each student researcher worked with an academic supervisor at their institution
Co-leads	Dr. Mary Elizabeth Luka - a scholar at the University of Toronto - was brought into the initiative during the application process as its co-lead and overall academic supervisor. Robin Sokoloski, the Director of Organizational Development at Mass Culture, spearheaded the project from the beginning.

Importantly, the projects did not adhere to the timeline laid out in Table one. The delays in selecting arts organizations, developing those relationships, and obtaining ethics approval meant that none of the qualitative impact frameworks were fully developed and presented in month 11 of the project. However, the academic co-lead spearheaded the development of a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Connections grant application to fund an extension of the project. The funding enabled the researchers to gather for a sensemaking session in May to begin presenting their frameworks in regional roundtables to solicit feedback. Designed with the intention of the frameworks to be malleable and adaptable to different contexts, at the time of this paper, the circulation and development of these frameworks is ongoing, currently being tested in a new cohort of organizations not involved in the original RinR initiative.

Evaluative Research

In Fall 2021, Mass Culture initiated a developmental evaluative process for the RinR initiative. The evaluation had three purposes: 1) to gather data and facilitate analysis of the key questions that the initiative was trying to understand; 2) to inform Mass Culture's implementation and adaptation of the initiative; and 3) to generate insights on principles and practices that could inform the design of future initiatives. Developmental evaluation was appropriate for this evaluation due to anticipated novelty, creativity and improvisation in how the RinR initiative would adapt to multiple relationships, changing conditions and an evolving understanding of the nature of the problem being addressed. Developmental evaluation does not aim to measure specific, predetermined goals because it assumes the research path and destination are evolving. The approach supports adaptive work by marrying the evaluative reasoning and evidence base of evaluation with the dynamic nature of innovation (Gamble, 2008).

The RinR evaluation was highly participatory from its start in Fall 2021 to finish at a sensemaking session in May 2022. While Mass Culture hired a consultant and research assistant, they also involved participants (*e.g.*, Mass Culture representatives, funders) in the evaluative research. The process began with a series of workshops with Mass Culture, academic partners, and participating

funders to generate and refine a framework for the evaluation. The framework was organized around five principal lines of inquiry that then guided the development of research and evaluation questions, data gathering, and analysis.

First, the “Benefits and Effects” line of inquiry focused on whether and to what extent value was being generated for those engaged in the initiative, asking: “How do the participating student researchers, academic institutions, funders, and arts organizations benefit from this initiative?” Based on 19 one-to-one interviews with participants, the interviewer compiled their notes onto four separate worksheets, which then prompted further conversation on the program benefits with the funders, arts organizations, and researchers at a final sensemaking session.

Second, the “Program Design Adaptations” line of inquiry focused on the design, asking: “Which program support features are most useful, and are there any improvements that can be made in future iterations of the initiative?” “Which conditions facilitate constructive engagement between researchers, universities, arts organizations, and funders?” and “What are the challenges that emerge and how do we address them?” Evaluators gathered information on the initiative’s program design through video diaries. The diaries were a monthly interview-style reflection where Mass Culture’s co-lead had a discussion with one of the members of the project’s advisory group, as well as interviews with researchers, supervisors, participating arts organizations, and members of the funder advisory.

Third, the “Values Alignment” line of inquiry focused on understanding the stated and emerging project values according to those involved, asking: “What are the core principles of this initiative and to what extent are these principles carried out in practice?” Early in the initiative, the researchers worked with the co-leads to develop guiding principles under four headings: Ownership and Control, Diverse Knowledge Process, Resolution, and Decision Making Process (see Figure one). Their work provided an initial overview of what mattered to the researchers. The evaluation then involved an analysis of stakeholder interviews and video diaries to deepen understanding of what participants more broadly valued.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR THE RESEARCH GROUP BOTH AS A GROUP AND IN THE FIELD			
Ownership & Control	Diverse Knowledge Process	Resolution	Decision Making Process
<p>Shared understanding (agreements) about the research: purpose, who can use it, how it can be shared</p> <p>Refer back to your ethics documentation</p> <p>Agree where information/ research will be stored in advance</p> <p>Communicate boundaries</p> <p>Information belongs to those who provided it. Always receive consent before sharing.</p>	<p>Be intentional about space (headspace & actual space)</p> <p>Respect Indigenous protocols and processes</p> <p>Remember that we all have different perspectives, so remembering to ask each other</p>	<p>LISTEN to one another's perspectives</p> <p>Demonstrate empathy</p> <p>working to cultivate trust - you can't resolve a conflict alone</p>	<p>Consensus building</p> <p>Find ways that the decisions will benefit the community we're researching</p> <p>Allow time for trust to be built</p> <p>Be mindful of the position of others</p>

Figure 1: Research in Residence: Arts' Civic Impact Guiding Principles

Fourth, the “Efficacy and Potential” line of inquiry focused on the overarching idea of Research in Residence, asking: “Was this initiative effective in facilitating connections between academic research and arts organizations?” “Did the research address relevant questions and needs of arts organizations?” and “Were the strategies of the program effective in stimulating the kinds of changes and explorations that were hoped for?” In order to address these questions, evaluators synthesized the available data at the end of the process.

Finally, the “Knowledge Mobilization and Research Engagement” line of inquiry was not addressed as the initiative, which ran from Spring 2021 to Spring 2022, did not yet have knowledge to mobilize. In the intended and expected next iteration of the Research in Residence initiative, knowledge mobilization will be a focus of the evaluation, and this line of inquiry is expected to be more prominent. Due to the lack of data in the development evaluation reports, we do not engage with this line of inquiry in this paper.

A series of sensemaking workshops took place throughout the initiative as an opportunity to engage with, reflect on and discuss what was being learned as part of the first four lines of inquiry. There were two virtual sessions and a final in-person sensemaking session in May 2022. The virtual sensemaking sessions involved reflection on data gathered through the interviews, which was synthesized and added to a Miro Board (e.g., see Figure Two). The shared Miro Board provided those engaged in the sensemaking - the funder advisory and Mass Culture co-leads - with access to

summary data and a record of how understanding on various questions evolved through the course of the initiative.



Figure 2: Sample of a shared Miro Board activity

The May sensemaking workshop focused on the benefits and efficacy lines of inquiry. All the data gathered related to benefits was presented on poster-size worksheets. Small groups, which included the co-leads, researchers, funders, and Mass Culture representatives, rotated between worksheets to reflect on what had been posted. They discussed and responded to two questions for each worksheet: 1) What stands out for you in the data? 2) To what extent do these results reflect what we had hoped for in Research in Residence? For example, see Figure 3. The answer to this second question fed into an exercise on the efficacy line of inquiry, which was explored with the funder advisory. The objectives were anonymously rated for effectiveness on a scale and the results of this informal poll were used as a prompt to elicit further discussion.



Figure 3: Sample Worksheet from the May Sensemaking Session

The collective review and analysis of the data through these sensemaking sessions was the most essential feature of the developmental evaluation. In an initiative that intended to disrupt established patterns of ownership, extraction, and utility in research, the collective interpretation of data was a method to model these values while also building practice and understanding for working in this way. The distribution of 'who decides' in evaluation redistributes the power that is implicit - and often explicit - in research and evaluation.

Findings

Within this section, we summarize the findings in the developmental evaluation report written for the RinR initiative. Some of the content is duplicated with illustrative examples drawn from the authors' familiarity with the initiative and personal communication with the RinR co-leads. As noted above, we have focused on the first four lines of inquiry - that is, benefits and effects, program design and adaptations, values, as well as efficacy and potential - due to the lack of data available as part of the knowledge mobilization and research engagement inquiry.

Benefits and Effects

The Researchers benefited from the relationships they developed as they collaborated and interacted with each other, Mass Culture, the funder advisory, supervisors, and arts organizations. RinR participants worked with researchers to develop theoretical framings and viable research designs, providing mentorship, examples, and opportunities to learn from each other. Researchers benefited from camaraderie with one another as they spent the year collaborating virtually while

they developed their work. They also established unique relationships with funders which generated new ways of interacting with one another. For example, a representative of the Canada Council for the Arts was able to connect a researcher to specific members of the arts community.

The project supported researchers as they explored different methodologies of relevance to measuring arts' civic impact. Each researcher developed their own approach as appropriate to the topic and context when working "in residence" with arts organizations. For example, one researcher utilized the Delphi method, while another utilized Indigenous material practice to develop approaches appropriate to their individual projects with distinct arts organizations in different regions. Their different approaches to on-the-ground research as part of the five individual research projects addressing the shared objective of measuring arts civic impact demonstrated the variety of research practices that can be implemented within the arts community and different arts organizations. This represents a broader benefit of the RinR initiative.

The participating arts organizations noted it was beneficial to have someone solely dedicated to knowledge gathering and discovery for their organization. The participatory process that some of the researchers implemented enabled arts organizations to experience the impact of the research themselves, which dismantled the extractive nature of research and made the research results more accessible. For example, the researcher who utilized Indigenous material practice convened local arts organizations to create rattles and drums as they engaged in conversation (Grauer, 2022). Another researcher used a maker-space approach, which employed an arts making process into the convening to help make the research feel less extractive and more like relationship building. As the arts organizations engaged in research alongside the researchers through these processes, they found that including an academic perspective in their organization introduced new ideas and opportunities.

As mentioned above, the relationships that developed between researchers and funders were also beneficial. The funders provided assistance to researchers as they interacted with and mentored others involved in the project (*e.g.*, Mass Culture staff). Notably, the arts funders themselves also benefited from participating in the design of the RinR initiative and evaluation. They valued playing a direct role in an initiative that supported a culture shift in the way research is conducted in the sector. This "shift" was explained as working in collaboration as opposed to observation, ensuring diversity and inclusion were ingrained and valued in the project, as well as supporting the accessibility of research. Funders were noticeably enthusiastic about the development of qualitative frameworks and the evolution of qualitative measures to demonstrate impact in the sector.

The frameworks and other research findings that have or will be developed are not the only areas of new knowledge seen as beneficial to those involved. The project team, including Mass Culture, developed new practices to engage multiple, diverse groups in research projects. Most notably, Mass Culture worked with the academic co-lead to foster a sense of community and learning space for the group of geographically dispersed student researchers. An online summer learning intensive, for example, convened 6 researchers in a virtual space. The series led to more

consistency in the research training they received, helped them learn from one another, and provided the foundation for a peer group to lean on for support.

Program design and adaptation

Collaboration in multiple forms was key to the design and success of the RinR project, which required trust early in the process. Participants found that maintaining trust required rigorous communication, many opportunities to make decisions together, and the encouragement of dispersed leadership. For example, the initiative involved five separate research teams that approached their research differently and worked at their own speeds. Despite this, navigating their different timelines to bring all five research teams together in a way that felt meaningful to each was not reported as a major challenge as the teams were respectful and supportive of one another in their work. There were also multiple entry points for different participant groups to come together and discuss the research throughout its process. Examples include a guest talk, the summer learning intensives, one-on-one mentorship, group meetings between the co-leads and other participants (researchers, academic supervisors, funder advisory, arts organizations), video summaries of meetings, a Slack channel, and resource sharing. These meeting points provided opportunities to discuss power dynamics at different points throughout the process, which was essential for many participants. It gave those who don't feel as though they hold power to share how the collaboration and relationships were affecting them and their work regarding the shared guiding principles discussed below.

These opportunities to discuss research created a deliberate space for collaboration to occur and reflect an important component of the RinR initiative's design. That is, bringing together people who operate within two different spheres: academia and the not-for-profit arts sector. These spheres of activity abide by different timelines, rules, and incentives, which sometimes leads to tension. During the application process, the Mitacs representative recommended adding an academic co-lead to the initiative in addition to each student's individual supervisor at their institution, leading to adaptation in the RinR initiative's design. Robin Sokoloski, the Director of Organizational Development at Mass Culture, approached Dr. Mary Elizabeth Luka with the University of Toronto Scarborough due to an existing relationship with Sokoloski, past work in the sector, a research interest in impacts, and her expertise in qualitative methodologies of relevance. She helped with the application's redevelopment, which was ultimately successful. Luka's addition was essential because she is well positioned within academia and has a background in the not-for-profit sector. She was able to identify and address gaps in knowledge amongst participants regarding academic processes such as the need to wait for the development of well-defined projects with participating arts organizations identified to begin the ethics review process. Further, the original project design had assumed researchers would receive any support and training needed to develop their projects and navigate academia. However, within academic systems, supervisors have individual approaches to mentorship and institutions have different course requirements. The

involvement of an academic co-lead enabled more consistent research training through mentorship, a summer intensive, and resource sharing.

While adding Luka to the project team led to adaptations seen as beneficial to the design, not all tensions between and within spheres of activity were solved. In particular, the initial timeline did not account for the time involved in obtaining ethics approval from the researchers' universities. The field research (in the language of academia) or research residencies (in the language of the arts sector) were also delayed due to the challenges of selecting arts organizations appropriate to address the researchers' initial research interests and questions. Many arts organizations do not have existing relationships with academic researchers or familiarity with research beyond evaluation. These relationships and understandings take time to build. To acknowledge existing relationships and groups of arts organizations working with similar interests, the selection process for arts organizations was adapted. For example, a group of dance companies worked with one researcher as there were multiple dance organizations interested in his research. While the relationships amongst the research teams were eventually built, and most arts organizations were described as generous with information, the selection of arts organizations should have begun earlier in the process. Notably, the late addition of arts organizations to the project is due in part to the intentional focus on the researchers in the initial stages. Centering the researchers and their interest was a deliberate component of the RinR project's design. As a result, many of the arts organizations themselves were not involved in the foundational stages of the project.

Values Alignment

As part of the work to center the researchers, the co-leads worked with the researchers early in the project to establish shared guiding principles using the headings "ownership and control," "diverse knowledge process," "resolution," and "decision making process" (See Figure three). When conflicts or tensions arose, researchers were able to approach the project co-leads with reference to these shared principles, which articulated a commitment to being mindful of other's positions. The researchers could then suggest changes in the design or accepted research practices. For example, academia and the not-for-profit arts sector have different traditions and expectations regarding paying research participants, which include differing views between the sectors due to the power dynamics involved in research projects. Researchers surfaced this tension and worked to develop a new Compensation Chart providing minimum payments for research participants.

As the RinR initiative centered the researchers and the guiding principles they developed, value alignment amongst participants more broadly was important to successful collaboration. Notably, the project brought together groups of people whose relationships reflect distinct power dynamics. Funders participated as advisors and, at times, worked directly with the researchers to provide mentorship. According to participants, this was possible due to the alignment of their values with the principles researchers identified, including taking time to listen to one another's perspectives, investing in trust-building, and being mindful and empathetic of the position of others.

In addition to committing to the guiding principles, participants cultivated a culture of experimentation built around the idea that so-called “failure” is not necessarily bad. Participants hoped for the development of five tangible outputs, yet those involved also understood that either the initiative broadly or individual projects might not deliver on the promise of a flexible qualitative impact measurement framework. Alleviating the pressure to succeed in this way enabled researchers to pursue the work that was important to them. The evaluation found that this emphasis on experimentation over deliverables was possible due to the value placed on developing a shared understanding of the purpose of the research, respecting that people work in different ways and at a different pace, and working to cultivate trust. Tension continued to exist because many participants were used to having a set plan with specific deliverables. Both academia and the arts sector work within structures that make experimentation difficult despite the shared understandings, respect, and trust that developed.

Working to cultivate trust involved working toward processes that were equitable and transparent. The commitment to transparency required a solid communication strategy facilitated through tools such as a critical path document and regular meetings. While participants believe more could have been done to ensure clear communication, shared values made ongoing conversations and adaptations related to developing an equitable and transparent process possible. Participants valued making space for thoughtful exchange that is accessible and respectful, sharing processes with clarity and creativity, and valuing people’s time by acknowledging their contributions.

Efficacy and Potential

Both the individual projects and overall initiative were experiments. In the absence of knowledge mobilization and validation, the potential of the methodologies used, and the frameworks being developed are open questions. However, the RinR initiative’s design effectively stimulated the kinds of changes and explorations that participants desired. The initiative worked to position research within the arts sector as relational rather than extractive or transactional. To that end, participants explored new ways of working on research for the Canadian arts sector such as the involvement of funders as an advisory committee and providing support for 6 student interns with supervisors at their institutions alongside an academic co-lead. As the lines of inquiry above indicate, the initiative’s design and shared values were key to the participant’s ability to work collaboratively and, by extension, the perceived efficacy of the initiative, despite the incomplete nature of the individual projects at the end of the year.

At the individual project level, participants found having the researchers work directly with the arts organizations through a participatory approach shifted common views toward research in the sector. Supporting diverse perspectives, methodologies, and ways of knowing greatly shifted how research is viewed as it engaged members of the arts community in creative and collaborative ways. Participating in arts organizations felt more involved, respected, and valued.

Discussion and Conclusion

The developmental evaluation conducted for the RinR initiative aimed to learn from participants broadly to facilitate adaptations and inform future collaborative research projects on areas of shared interest. This includes the development of additional flexible qualitative frameworks of particular interest to both funders and arts organizations. Reflecting on the five lines of inquiry contributed to the development of the initiative and an understanding of how participants from two spheres - the arts and academic sectors - as well as distinct groups within spheres - funders and arts organizations - can create space together to collaborate for their mutual benefit. Several important lessons emerged from the evaluation, which will inform future Mass Culture collaborations and provide insights on how to develop responsive community-engaged research practices that are more aligned with the values of the arts community.

Before considering these lessons, it is important to note that the funding availability shaped the initiative's design and, therefore, learning from participants about collaborative research in the arts sector. The RinR initiative did not start as a collaboration between all of those who eventually became involved or even as a collaboration between the two spheres. Groups and individuals were included at different stages, starting with an idea between an organization interested in research, Mass Culture, and a group of funders in the Canadian arts sector. Mitacs provided an opportunity that encouraged connections between the arts sector and academia, funding student researchers to collaborate with organizations to address key issues. The funding parameters led to the inclusion of academia through Master's and PhD students with supervisors at their institutions instead of consultants or more established academics to lead project teams. A funder, Mitacs, also encouraged the inclusion of an academic co-lead to work alongside Mass Culture's leadership. Due to the involvement of an academic co-lead, the initiative then extended the knowledge mobilization and research engagement work over a second year with a more academically oriented funding source: the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council's (SSHRC) Connections grant. While the SSHRC funded component of the RinR initiative began as the developmental evaluation finished, and is not included in this reflection, its use demonstrates a key lesson for the initial participants and individual project teams. Participants recognized that relational research designs, which feel collaborative and beneficial to the participants, are possible with project teams embedded in academia which are interested in issues of relevance to members of the arts sector participating in different ways.

Cultivating these relationships involved deliberately and actively creating space(s) for collaboration that straddled the art sector and academic sector, valuing the different perspectives offered for mutual benefit. The initiative's adaptation to include co-leads - that is, the original applicant who represented the sector and a person from academia - exemplifies the attempt to create space between or intersect with the two spheres. Ultimately, the initiative benefited from both of their expertise in complementary ways.

Strategies born from the arts sector were key to the establishment of foundational ethics and understanding for the initiative, such as the development of guiding principles and a non-hierarchical governance structure. As others have observed, the development of consensus on ethics is key to community-engaged research practices (Hoover et al 2019). Equity and justice are particularly important organizing principles for research projects aiming to resist transactional

relationships through an acknowledgment that research is not inherently good and may involve injustice (London et. al., 2022). RinR participants from both spheres committed to these ideas as demonstrated by the guiding principles (*e.g.*, respect for Indigenous protocols) and the shared values (*e.g.*, making space for thoughtful exchange that is accessible and respectful) seen as critical to the project. Most notably, the role of listening, respect, and empathy were key to perceived successes (*e.g.*, the creation of a culture of experimentation) and the initiative's potential to prompt further research or collaborations of this kind in the sector.

While sectoral practices and strategies contributed to the articulation of an ethical foundation for the initiative, academic practices helped provide a shared knowledge base from which the researchers could build their theoretical and methodological approaches. Initially, academics were only involved at the project team level - that is, the student researchers with their supervisors. The approach failed to acknowledge the students' diverse foundational understanding of research due to their distinct backgrounds as well as their positions within different universities and programs of study across the country with supervisors taking their own approaches to mentorship. The addition of an academic co-lead facilitated the inclusion of strategies and knowledge from the academic sector into the initiative's design broadly rather than simply at the project level. The academic co-lead provided more consistency in educational foundations related to methodology and university processes. The summer learning intensive and approaches to sharing resources enabled participants to center the needs of student researchers as they more clearly defined their specific research interests.

The value of an academic co-lead is further exemplified in the issues experienced around university ethics approval, a process that was unfamiliar to many of the arts sector participants. Participants found Luka's involvement helpful in navigating the process, but there were ultimately delays that prevented projects from beginning or being completed within the initial timeframe. Participants attributed the issue to the experimental or unfamiliar (to academia) approaches used in projects, which made obtaining ethics approval more challenging. There are two overlapping issues relating to ethics approval. First, the initiative revealed challenges in how ethics review boards consider approaches that are innovative and emergent as part of dynamic initiatives. In a discussion about community-based practice, the ethics review embedded in universities also raised questions about how to anchor the community agency in ethical decision making (see, for example, Pascal's article in this issue). Second, the initial timeline only allotted for 8 months to select the arts organizations and then engage in the research. While Luka helped to rewrite and provide consistency to the Mitacs application that outlined the length of the initiative, the general timeline - that is, a one-year vs. a two-year collaboration - had already been established when she was recruited. As a result, this aspect of the design did not fully account for knowledge from academia, such as the need to recruit arts organizations to individual projects before seeking ethics approval. Future collaborations between spheres may benefit from the earlier inclusion of someone in academia into the broader initiative's leadership, which would enable a better understanding of the timelines and bureaucracy of academia as they relate to the art sector's expectations.

On one exception, the arts organizations were the last group of participants to be included in the initiative, joining four of the project teams. Their late inclusion reflected and reinforced a significant limitation in the project design: insufficient time. Time is always a challenge to community-engaged research due to the necessity of relationship building (e.g., DePrince et al., 2022, Flexner, Rawlings & Riley 2021, Holden et al., 2022). Many arts organizations have little extra capacity for exploratory engagements, making it difficult to involve them from the ideational stages of a project, exacerbating the problem. Some RinR design adaptations, such as adjusting a project to consider groups of arts organizations working with similar interests or adjusting the initiative's process for organizations to express interest, helped to recruit organizations and better facilitate relationships in project teams. Participating in arts organizations' positive experiences that shifted their perspectives on possibilities for collaborative research with the academic sector may also inform future responses to calls for participants in similar projects. Despite this, the developmental evaluation did not provide a clear answer on how to best engage arts organizations in ways that account for their limited resources and the timelines embedded within both academic and funding structures.

While not involved in the initial emphasis on and commitment to experimentation, the participating arts organizations helped create the practical space for their project team to experiment with methodologies and the development of qualitative frameworks. As found in the values line of inquiry, the emphasis on experimentation reflected a shared understanding of the purpose of the initiative: to explore ways of working together. To that end, aspects of the design both reflected and contributed to a culture of experimentation. As the researchers were asked to be experimental, they were also participating in an experiment in the form of the initiative itself. The inclusion of a funder advisory, for example, provided *both* financial and in-kind support while contributing to the initiative's design and, in some cases, mentoring project teams was an experiment. Participants came together in a variety of ways to learn from the process and each other with an eye for the potential for utility rather than the need for specific research outputs.

Due to the focus on experimentation, the research teams were able to use methods and approaches to research collaboratively with arts organizations in different parts of the country. These approaches reflect new ways of analyzing arts' civic impact in the Canadian arts sector, and some have or will contribute to the development of new qualitative frameworks. Information on specific projects is available elsewhere in this special issue (e.g., Pascal, 2023; Bernicky, 2023; Richmond, 2023; Bugg, Wright & Zurba, 2023). Since the projects were not completed during the evaluation period and the results were not disseminated, the methods used have not undergone a peer-review process. The impact frameworks developed also require validation within the arts and cultural sector.¹ In 2022-2023, researchers conducted regional roundtables to discuss their work. Evaluating this process was, unfortunately, not part of the developmental evaluation. As such, emphasizing experimentation was important to support approaches, but the perceived legitimacy of the new methods and frameworks is an ongoing question. Within the arts sector itself, the enthusiasm of participating funders and arts organizations during the evaluation suggested

perceived validity and legitimacy. Further, Mass Culture is well positioned and has developed relationships within both sectors that may help facilitate this work.

In short, the RinR initiative is a starting point for collaborative research in the Canadian arts sector of relevance to diverse groups, including those in the arts (*e.g.*, funders) and academic sectors (*e.g.*, students). It has confirmed the significance of developing a shared ethical foundation in community-engaged research projects and the value of strategies from the arts sector to create this foundation. The initiative's design and guiding principles were important to create a space that valued diverse forms of knowledge, including those drawn from different actors in the arts sector and academia. Due to the different structures within those sectors, the involvement of people from both in leadership was critical and should be considered for future projects.

¹ Mass Culture has led a subsequent phase of validation within the sector, testing out the framework through use by additional arts organizations. See <https://massculture.ca/arts-impact/> for more information

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