



The Pennsylvania Dance Theater will create a piece inspired by objects in the Palmer Museum of Art's exhibition Devotion and Diversity: South Asian Sculpture from the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In conjunction with the MLN-funded exhibition, the Palmer Museum, based at the Pennsylvania State University, will be collaborating with the university on a diverse array of educational programs from a contemporary Indian film series to a family workshop on creating sculpture.

Evaluating Collaborations

“No one should kid themselves,” a participant in the second of the Museum Loan Network’s three convenings emphasized. “Collaboration is not fluffy work. It is hard, frustrating, and unremittingly real, but it’s worthwhile and absolutely essential in this new age.” But how do we prove what we assume to be true? Does collaboration really enable partners to do their own work more effectively? Does it really benefit others—i.e., the “community?” And if scarce resources are to be invested in an extremely difficult enterprise, how do we summon evidence to support these arguments? Those who convened for the third and final MLN session addressed such tough questions in considering the matter of collaboration and evaluation, both in their general discussion and in a smaller breakout group.

Members of the breakout noted that evaluation has little merit in and of itself. (“Testing for order and control, as states now do for public education, is just plain wrong,” one argued.) To be sure, evaluation must account for the use of resources, but its true value lies in providing information for two other equally important purposes: to introduce discussion of appropriate goals and to refine processes. Evaluation, they stressed, should be viewed not simply as a process of collecting and assessing data, but as a purposeful frame of mind—an ongoing exercise of judgment—that should inform all aspects of collaboration.

When collaborative projects are for the “social or public good,” in fact, evaluating the reasons for getting involved is as important as evaluating the end results. Sustaining such projects is crucial because expect-

tations are high and resources limited, and some undertakings simply don't make sense—when the risks are too great, the participants' needs and goals too disparate, or the motives inappropriate. (A breakout group at the second meeting found this to be true when they tried to “develop” a hypothetical collaboration among organizations who had all coveted a plot of public land that was ultimately “awarded” to the local opera company. Among the partners whose roles they assumed, no one would have relinquished their imaginative hold on the space, they realized, and nothing short of a regional planning process could have accommodated—much less sustained—the ambition that remained.)

Ultimately, said breakout group members, evaluation should be concerned with:

- The **problem** the collaboration seeks to address (Is it the right one?);
- The **vision** for it (Are the goals appropriate?);
- The **strategy** (Are the best means being employed?);
- The **implementation** (Are the strategies being appropriately and well used?); and, finally,
- The **impact** (Have the desired outcomes been achieved?).

As a process, collaboration has value in solving problems because it links a “means to a means,” they noted; ways in which work is done can be affected, even transformed; simply by combining or linking resources. But, ultimately, one looks at outcomes, and when one does, there are definite indicators of value—as when evidence suggests:

- **Efficiencies have been gained** (within organizations or by contractual agreement, between organizations);
- **Content is richer** (when collectively the unique input of contributors has greater—broader and deeper—relevance); and
- **Resources have increased**, both for the partners and for the public (such resources might include political clout, or sheer brainpower, when the defined needs are too great or complex to be met alone).

In collecting evidence of such added value, participants in the third MLN meeting stressed that data should be gathered every step of the

way, even at the on-set, since baseline information is necessary to create benchmarks against which progress and outcomes can be measured. Moreover, information should be both quantitative and qualitative (like anecdotes). It takes both to create a picture of impact, they pointed out. (Scientists actually yearn for good stories, it was noted, because they give their masses of data something they lack—meaning.)

It's also important to get as many people as possible involved, once collaborative work gets under way, to capture “telling details” and unintended consequences, both good and bad. This kind of information gets lost en route, and having multiple viewpoints ensures that less is lost. Electronic journals, a participant reported, work well. Another idea they had: bringing a university into the collaboration. As a conferee pointed out, “they’re always looking for something to study,” and might be open to experimenting with research designs to get at the question of causality—i.e., Was the result directly an outgrowth of what the collaborators did? Pairing artists with researchers to come up with new ideas about how to document, and how to assess, the significance of information was another suggestion.

Dancers with the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange are being trained to collect data “in ways that will satisfy someone who speaks a different language,” it was reported, and they are already seeing “something dif-

Gary Burger, Co-director, Community Partners Program at the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation (co-funder of the Museum Loan Network), reports that at Knight they focus on *levels of risk* when considering how to invest their grant dollars.

First, he says, there's *idea risk*. “Does the proposed project make sense? Are the anticipated outcomes likely to be produced by the proposed intervention? Has the idea been tested and shown to be effective?”

Then there is *implementation risk*. “Some projects,” he says, “while known to be effective, are extremely difficult to implement. The Big Brothers, Big Sisters program, is an example. It works wonderfully when mentors are able to make a long-term commitment, but may have no impact—or even a negative impact—if the

mentoring relationship is intermittent or short term.

Finally, there's *evidence risk* to be considered. “Can you measure results? Can you determine whether the anticipated outcomes occurred? Will you be able to know if the needle moved?” He asks. “You may have to spend a lot of money to find out. There's a cost-benefit ratio with any type of evaluation.”

None of these considerations—thinking about risks associated with the idea, the implementation, or the evidence to be gathered—can be an “add-on,” Burger stresses. “Talking to people when they leave an exhibit, for example, may be enough to gauge success, but that needs to be part of the discussion from the beginning. The key to any kind of evaluation is that all parties know upfront what

outcomes are expected; otherwise there's likely to be a disconnect—and that includes funders,” he emphasizes. “They may be on a completely different track.” He gives an example: “if the desired outcome is to train teachers, one party might think it enough to assess whether they've actually been trained, but that won't provide a qualitative judgment about whether they're effective or not—i. e., whether kids have actually learned—which might be another partner's interest.”

“I can't stress enough how hard collaborations are,” Burger says. “People have said to me ‘it was fabulous, but I will never do it again.’” Still, he acknowledges, “when they work, they're extraordinary—the results are far greater than anything that can be achieved alone—a true realization of the social contract.”

ferent in the lens.” That, in turn, is influencing the way the dancers are looking at impact—i.e., they have created a “feedback loop” to make use of what evaluation turns up. What is key to that final loop, participants stressed, is identifying “sustainable elements”—the changes in thinking and modes of operation, like the dancers’, that suggest true, meaningful, long-term impact, and collecting data that reflects such change. While everyone should be asked “how the collaboration is working for them”—including museum guards, staff, visitors, teachers, and students—“it’s not enough to say ‘the kids loved it, or think differently, or that someone speaks up who never did before.’” It’s necessary to document *how* the teachers now teach, *what* the students now write that indicates *transformation*—benefits that can and should be sustained.

As a corollary to collaboration, evaluation is a process that demands similar flexibility. If the collaborative work uncovers new approaches or resources to meet community needs, for example, evaluation must be able to track and assess them. The new technologies offer some promising vehicles to manage flexibility in collecting—like the electronic journals already mentioned. They offer models for getting people involved, as well—including interactive web documentation to engage the general public.

Ultimately, evaluation should consider impacts: how to create them, measure them, and make them go farther. Caution is appropriate and necessary in these considerations, but so, too, is “framing” the process of judging from a variety of angles. In business, it was said, the equivalent of “evaluation” is an examination of “return on investment” (ROI). Wide distribution of exhibit materials via the new technologies could



Celeste Miller

For **Celeste Miller**, a dancer and performance artist, “evaluation” has become a way of life. About 10 years ago she found herself disturbed by the fact that fifth grade teachers with whom she’d been working were about to rate her “effectiveness” on a scale of one to five. “It pushed a button,” she recalls. “I wondered what they’d be looking at, and how their responses were going to be used.” The incident prompted her to “get proactive,” to ask herself “what is it I need to know to get better?” And it launched a new *modus operandi*.

Miller developed something she calls “a reflection form”—which *she*

distributes. The term “reflection” is used advisedly: “I wanted to create the opportunity for people to think about the experience they’d had—to synthesize and internalize it,” she explains. Realizing that would demand something other than a series of yes or no questions, she devised queries and tasks that would engage her audiences’ “right brains” and judge more than whether they “had simply learned well or not.” (In the same way that she gets students with whom she’s doing curricular work in biology to communicate what they understand about cell formation through movement, for example, Miller often gets

them to create choreography.) She also began asking herself “what is my own goal here? Where I hoped people would go—is that where they went?” In time she was delighted to notice an unforeseen payoff: that when audience members engage in such reflection exercises they’re also better prepared for their next experience.

Not long after she began developing new ways to get people to think about what they’d learned, Miller started working with a sociologist, a friend who recognized how differently they asked questions and gathered data. Now eight years underway, their collaboration—an annual four-week

be seen as a good “ROI,” as could collaborative partnerships that create efficiencies, pool resources, and generate new forms of capital—the greater “yields” that promote partnerships and mergers in business. Business also looks at risk in formal terms that assume loss. Venture capitalists, it was noted, select 10 projects to succeed on one. While the margin for error is “razor-thin” in the nonprofit sector, as a participant put it, the importance of building social and cultural capital cannot be underestimated, nor can the “ROIs” that collaborative partnerships bring to that effort.

residency at a high school in western Massachusetts (sponsored by Jacob’s Pillow)—focuses on two things: “how students learn what they know” and “the role organized religion plays in a high school student’s world.” (As a “lab environment,” she notes, schools are ideal for this kind of research.)

When Miller joined the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, her work with “reflection and critical response processes” went even deeper. In fact, it has led to a major project funded by Americans for the Arts—a study of whether and how the Dance Exchange (whose members develop choreography through intense interaction

with communities) is or is not, “enabling civic dialogue.” The questions being addressed: “what is the relation between art and civic dialogue? And what if the Exchange’s process enables such a relationship?” Members of the dance troupe speak with a range of people, from administrators to community groups, asking how what they have seen on stage impacts their lives—what effects they see.

Miller’s experiences have convinced her that artists can play a crucial role in devising ways to judge efficacy and impact, and feedback loops to refine ideas and processes. “Artists simply ask different ques-

tions,” she says. Then, too, people respond differently to artists than to others who gather information, such as researchers and journalists. Miller now views the field of evaluation as so potentially fertile that she imagines diverse research teams, which have been shaped with an eye to the kind of information desired. “They could include press people, mothers, artists—anyone whose perspective would provide access to new levels of understanding,” she says. “You’d get deeper so much faster.”