More Than Measuring: A Conversation with Dennie Palmer Wolf

With NEA funding, Local Learning commemorated our 20th anniversary with a gift to the field, the evocative forum "More Than Measuring." In addition to the distinguished evaluator of arts and cultural organizations and programs, Dennie Palmer Wolf of WolfBrown, the panel included Amanda Dargan and Tal Bar-Zemer of City Lore. When Dennie became evaluator of City Lore's Nations in Neighborhoods program, she and Amanda began crafting a relationship that would educate them both in new points of view and language over the four years of this U.S. Department of Education AEMDD grant.

The trio began the panel by asking, "How can externally imposed assessment requirements become an internally valuable opportunity for arts organizations?" Over the next two hours, they began to answer that question and others.

The conversation began with a discussion of the perceived constraints that many may feel in regards to evaluation. Some constraints included the concerns that:

- Measures exist apart from programs,
- "Serious" evaluation is only available through outside evaluators,
- Measures need to be “fixed” from the beginning,
- Only positive findings are “good”, and
- Math skills, cost, and valid research protocols make evaluation inaccessible to folklore projects.

Immediately, these constraints began to feel like “straw men” that should not discourage organizations and projects from doing good evaluation. Outlining the work of participatory evaluation, the panel demonstrated how three critical “tensions” could structure our understanding of designing and implementing assessments. The first was “Authenticity.” This simply asks us to consider how the evaluation is matched to the program and/or community. Does it make sense? Are the tools and design of the assessment appropriate and "authentic" to your work? Secondly, Dennie noted that “Responsibility” was a core aspect of the design of participatory evaluation. Namely, that the findings should speak to a public value. The key question here asks us to consider what it is that we really want to know as a result of the evaluation. This moves the mentality of evaluation from the idea that “test scores are up” to a wider range of qualities that we wish to demonstrate changed. Finally, the third critical part to participatory evaluation was to be able to demonstrate that it is “Vigorous.” This means that it is capable of measuring change and is defensible. Importantly, this asked us to consider both what is actually happening “on the ground”, but to also have the data and tools to share this knowledge to a general or outside audience.

The intellectual growth and exchange seen on the panel was inspiring and practiced the same spirit of dialogic research that they advocated for in evaluation. For example, folklorists' emphasis on the centrality of oral communication was new to Dennie, and the use of video recording interviews with students became an important way of measuring "what falls outside the rim of artist residencies." The point that we should learn how to connect what we do to other bodies of existing literature and research was also a real
opportunity to see how we could bridge worlds and disciplines through the data of our evaluations. For example, to address how young people learn to "read a neighborhood," they used the term "cosmopolitan literacy" to encompass what students were learning at the intersection of their multiple identities. Various and multifaceted measures of "cosmopolitan literacy" were designed and implemented. The findings were then read in light of Kwame Anthony Appiah’s construct of cosmopolitanism, opening the door to vast connections and meaning for the findings of the assessments.

The feedback we received from the audience of the session suggests that folks were able to take away a number of ideas and practical suggestions that they were excited to implement in to their own work. Local Learning recorded the session to allow us to offer their insights on evaluation and documentation in some different formats in the coming year.