

LiA Written Reflective Report

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Finding Common Ground: Conversations with Arts in the Parks Participants on
Community and Place

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One of the hobbies I have always neglected is drawing. I tried to sketch as many places as I could in Toronto. Here's a rough one of an Arts in the Parks outdoor cinema event I went to. I remember it being cold.

What did I do?

This summer, I did my LiA at the Toronto Arts Council/Foundation, acting as a research intern. Specifically, I worked on the organisation's Arts in the Parks (AIP) programme: free outdoor arts activities in local parks across the city throughout the summer intended to equalise arts accessibility.

For some context, AIP was created following extensive research into public opinion about the arts. Although 96 percent of Torontonians saw the benefits of the arts to the city, nearly 9 in 10 saw at least one barrier to attending arts events. Barriers cited were cost, proximity, and lack of quality events in their neighbourhood.

To directly address these barriers, Toronto Arts Foundation created Arts in the Parks. Since its creation in 2016, AIP has presented 2,426 events in 78 parks to over 700,000 Torontonians since its inaugural year in 2016. Events are free and family-friendly and include theatre, music concerts, film screenings and workshops for children and their families and neighbours.

Community engagement is a key feature of the program. Many of the artists' work directly with residents to tailor their programming around their needs and concerns to produce something that is reflective of the community.

Previous evaluation of the programme relied on short surveys that asked for Likert-style ratings on their experiences. My aim was to build a more qualitative picture of the AIP programmes through conducting 10 interviews, eventually culminating in a 6000-word report and policy brief. I sought out to find: how do AIP events foster social connections among people, and increase participants' sense of belonging within their local communities?

Does it all even matter in the grand scheme of it all?

One of tasks I have was to evaluate how my actions 'concretely contributed to the partner NGO, community, or sustainable development goal (SDG) on the ground' – the 'societal impact of my LiA'. In my initial project outline, the SDGs I had set out were SDG 3 – Good Health and Well-Being; SDG 10 – Reduce Inequalities; and SDG 11:



They gave me an official t-shirt at the Arts in the Parks events, so I didn't look like a creep when asking strangers for interviews

Sustainable Cities and Communities. On paper, I had drawn evidence-based recommendations to address these SDGs:

- I had affirmed how hyper-local practices and community engagement contributed to a greater perception of community, and, thus, stressed the importance of community engagement in cultivating social cohesion (SDG3).
- One of the discussions in my interviews was about the barriers to arts participation. Transport infrastructure was a big deciding factor into participation in the context of a sprawling city like Toronto, and my recommendations emphasised the need for a more localised approach rather than a concentration of programming downtown (SDG10 + SDG11).

As part of my placement, I also volunteered to help out during the events while gathering data, acting as the first point of contact for audiences and also helping set up stalls for the local artists and community organisations. On the ground, it was easy to feel meaningful when chatting to people there on how the event had lightened a community, but writing up these experiences in an office felt less so.

Thus, the feeling that my research was 'insignificant' definitely crept in my mind:

As I begin writing my report, it's been at the back of mind: what is this all for?... Where does it all go? I'm an active musician, and it's very easy how a good rehearsal can increase people's moods. When I write down my recommendations in a policy brief and watch the Times New Roman 11pt words stare back at me from a laptop screen, it's harder to draw a direct impact of what have I actually done. Am I just writing down what's already obvious?

– LiA Week 5 Reflection



The first Arts in the Parks event I attended: Samba in the Park. I had a go at some of the community dancing workshops. I had a great time but sadly it reaffirmed what I already know: I am as stiff as cardboard.

What does 'societal impact' even mean?

Does a set of words truly convince someone – a policymaker, a councillor, or a community organiser – to take action?

Or does it just sit into the abyss among the sea of other literature that gets neglected?

Well, I take an example from the other two interns, Elizabeth and Earnest, in the office. They had been working on a separate that showed the pockets of inequality in Toronto measured through the amount of arts programming in different wards. They had made great efforts to make the map as user-friendly as possible. It was really cool stuff.

During their presentation, one of the staff questioned whether the maps imply the council should deprioritise downtown Toronto in favour of local neighbourhoods? The lengthy discussion that ensued after showed that there was no right answer, but the research – when accessible – helps to generate conversation.

I realised that my project could also contribute to these ideas from a different perspective of lived experiences, rather than numbers. This helped me reconsider what it means for something to have a 'societal impact'.

To me, all these outputs of just one node in a massive network of tools that spark conversation. Whether it ultimately leads to a wider long-term systemic change is out of my control, but my hope is that through my presentation and the outputs I left behind, they can generate a conversation into some of the questions that will eventually snowball into a bigger institutional change. Perhaps on the community engagement model of arts events, or the way we evaluate social impact through quantitative and qualitative means.

I used to think that societal impact meant having the answers to questions, but in my LiA, I realised the same meaningful impact could also come from laying the groundwork to find out what questions we should be asking.



A badge on a curtain opposite my spot at the office. What does it mean to 'vote' for arts and culture? What is the social trade-off when we don't prioritise arts and culture? Is everyone affected equally?

Ethical Leadership Application

Recruitment

As I continue to recruit, I'm trying to connect with people more at the parks through further conversation than a simple 'give me your contacts so I can harvest your data' encounter... I have to 'read the room' when approaching recruitment, and adjust the way I explain the study so different people understand its purpose.

– LiA Week 2 Reflection

A big part of the LiA involved recruiting interviewees during the events. This is a push outside my comfort zone, but it also helped me to develop my interpersonal and empathetic skills. I had to recognise that I was a researcher at a place where people had gone to escape from their daily lives. I had to be aware of my alternative aims and be respectful to rejection and move swiftly, not let it get to me personally.

Given such a large free-flowing audience that came and went at different points, I used opportunistic sampling. Simply, I would approach random people when available/convenient, such as during a quiet break. One thing I had to be mindful of was my own internal biases and any societal prejudices that may distort who I considered 'approachable'. It is often assumed that research is neutral, but it is not and can never be. However, we can recognise the challenges that we face and address them head on, instead of sidelining them – to think about who has traditionally been excluded from voicing their opinions.

One challenge I encountered was that although I tried to include a working group that reflected the diversity of Toronto, my interview and survey questions were in English. This led to lower rates of recruitment in events held at areas with high migrant populations. I tried to make the process to sign up and arrange interview slots as easy and accessible as possible through flexible timing and clear language. However, this is a limitation that, if I had more time and resources to address, would have included translated resources to navigate these cultural barriers.

Strategy

Part of my project was evaluating how we can make the arts programmes not only economically accessible, but also culturally accessible. I dealt with a range of stakeholders (artists, community organisers, and audiences) who had a range of opinions of how we define 'culturally accessible'. For some, this meant programming arts that reflected the demographics of the neighbourhoods being served. For others,

this meant bringing experimental forms of art into public settings that had been traditionally excluded to certain groups of people, to create a space where audiences could interact with art they might not have encountered before.

When there's no universal definition, the distinction between what one might label as 'high' or 'low' art also raises questions about whose definition of artistic value should be prioritised. When this involved public money, opinions were often charged and divisive, so I had to remain respectful and empathetic to the people I spoke to.

I also think that this divergence of opinion is why we need to continually evaluate and monitor our practices, and consider what preconceptions have led us to the opinions we have. It is not necessarily about finding a single correct answer and focusing on the definition itself. Rather, it is about being willing to engage with the assumptions behind such opinions. These are not fixed ideals but things that are always in flux, and so we must recognise that what we can do to help communities should come from local knowledge.



One of the Arts in the Parks events I attended: POOLBODY
Performance art in a public pool in the suburb of Etobicoke

The Research Connection

Both my research summer and LiA touched on similar themes. They were both research projects aimed at exploring the impact of the arts on society. In the first summer, I focused on the impact of extracurricular activities (arts, sports, and academic) on children's social wellbeing. In my LiA, I examined the impact of free local outdoor arts programming on social cohesion within a community. Both had similar deliverables, a 6000-word report and a presentation – although the LiA also required a bigger emphasis on narrative and storytelling, as well as an additional one page policy brief.

Working Style

One thing that separated this project from my first research summer was that I mostly worked alone as opposed to being part of the group. Although I expected this to feel more demanding, I actually found it more relaxed because I felt less pressure from my peers.

While envisioned myself carefully balancing my research with tour, unexpected additional rehearsal times led me to have less time than I would have liked to research. I did try to pull more weight in the previous week by doing plenty of readings before I left. Yet, I was still frustrated at this situation. I was especially mindful of the fact that as this is a group project, everyone is implicitly expected to contribute a decent effort towards our aims. Perhaps, there was some guilt at not being able to help out more with the data collection, or a feeling of not doing enough. – Research Summer Week 4+5 Reflection

In contrast, I found my LiA easier to navigate because of the flexibility I had over my time. My supervisor was also very relaxed and generally trusted me to get along with things independently. Additionally, the company culture of Toronto Arts reflected this. I was in a hybrid working situation with no strict clocking of hours – just goodwill and the trust that I would deliver. With this increased responsibility to structuring my own time, I had to create my own schedule. On the days where I wasn't in the office, I still tried to wake up at regular hours and study in as much public libraries as I could cross off. I set timelines, ordered tasks in priorities, and took regular breaks to keep myself motivated. This became more important when it came to data collection, which involved attending events at irregular schedules such as weekends and weekday evenings. Through the LiA, I found that the autonomy suited me and allowed me to create greater ownership of the research process. However, the increased flexibility only works when it is accompanied by self-discipline.



I tried to work from as many University of Toronto libraries as I could. This one was my favourite: the Ivey in New College.



I also tried to get a good work-life balance going. I went to the gym a lot during this time and also sang and in the local church choir and kept up organ practice. See if you can spot me!

Audiences

In both my LiA and my research summer, I had to present my findings to a group of people. But the group of people I was presenting to differed – the research summer involved presenting to other Laidlaw scholars, whereas the LiA involved presenting to the staff.

In both presentations, the same public speaking skills were necessary to be an engaging speaker – the use of non-verbal body language, eye contact, the way you moved across the stage, etc. However, the difference in audience meant I had to think more carefully about how I communicated my research.

The research summer presentation took place in the context in an academic environment at the Laidlaw Conference. I still had to ensure what I was saying could be understood by those outside the subject area, but there was more room to move into the literature and the 'nitty gritty' of it all. One thing that this LiA has taught me the importance of storytelling – about conveying ideas and arguments to a wider audience. It doesn't matter how much placemaking theory you know, it won't convince someone to take action if they can't understand how it relates to them. This is especially true with an organisation like the Toronto Arts Council: when it is the taxpayer footing the bill for these initiatives, it is in their interest to know the public benefit and practical value of such programmes.

Thus, my presentation and policy brief is largely absent of the theories I was writing about in the report. Rather, it entered the stories of the people I interviewed, and the practical recommendations that I had produced. I had to differentiate the information I found most academically stimulating from the quotes I know would leave a lasting impact.

I think there is a place for both presentational styles - the sophistication of more academic-gearred ones, and more publicly accessible ones. However, my LiA has shown me that education and empathy are particularly important to solving societal inequalities. In my case, for arts funding, we cannot fairly expect people to fight a problem they do not yet understand. This doesn't mean 'dumbing down' information, but, instead, communicating complex ideas clearly enough that people feel the relevance.

Final thoughts

I really enjoyed my LiA! I learnt a lot about the way that arts bodies work on the inside. I also saw the careful consideration given to arts programming, the way it is evaluated, and how these social impacts are communicated to both the public and policymakers.

I also really enjoyed the autonomy and independence I had, and found a working style that allowed me to be productive, while taking the time to relax through hikes, exploring new places, and also musicmaking (of course). Separate to the LiA, I was having deep reflections on what I wanted my career path to look like as I enter my final year. My LiA definitely affirmed my desire to work in the realm of cultural policy and arts management, while also doing plenty of practical music making around that.



Toronto has many beautiful views. I hope to come back here someday...