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# Has not yet mastered headstands and other accidents in learning

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**ABSTRACT**

Language is powerful. How we choose to describe what we do, who we engage with, and how we undertake our practice defines both the scope and scale of what we do and what we can achieve. As we look to define our vision around arts engagement in a new decade it is timely to reflect on the language we have used to date to articulate arts and cultural engagement with children, young people and their communities, and examine its continued serviceability. At such a time of change we may need to look to alternative frames such as social impact, creative placemaking and storymaking to speak more forcefully about the value of arts encounters to governments, funding bodies and ourselves.

## Prologue

This is a written version of my keynote presented at the Drama Australia National Conference, 2020 Vision. The keynote was presented live at La Boite Theatre in Brisbane on Friday 9 April 2021. Due to social distancing restrictions still in place resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic the majority of delegates experienced the keynote via live-streaming in real time. I am indebted to the Drama Queensland committee and conference organisers for their tenacity in making the conference, and my keynote, accessible to all delegates. Some of the dynamics of live presentation has been lost in the text-based version of this keynote. I have also reduced the number of images that accompanied the presentation. I hope you get a sense of the energy from the words. I acknowledge the Turrbal and Yugara, as the First Nations owners of the lands where La Boite Theatre and Queensland Univerisity of Technology now stands. I pay respect to their Elders, lores, customs and creation spirits. I recognise that these lands have always been places of teaching, research and learning.

## Ah yes, that title

Let's start with the title of my keynote; *Has Not Yet Mastered Headstands and Other Accidents in Learning*. This is me in Year 3 at Bronte Public School in Sydney. Things that mattered to me aged 8 years included swimming, my best friend Lisa (known then as

**Figure 1.** Sandra Gattenhof aged 8. Image supplied by the author.

Buddy Boo 2 – the Buddy Boos were a club of two – me and Lisa), singing, drama, Girls Brigade, reading and school.

I loved school and adored my Year 3 teacher Mr Baynham. Mr Baynham let us write adaptations of well-loved stories and put them into the end of year school concert. He also acted as the director of class productions. In that year I became Alice in her Wonderland, a witch's cat called Fluffy Bum, and the jabberwocky. We even made a 'film' using still slide images to the 1974 hit song, *Billy Don't Be a Hero* that premiered at the school's open day. From these beginnings I can see a direct link to where I am today. It is even reflected in my end of year 3 report card.

'Sandra is a friendly child who always works very well'. Lovely. 'As usual Sandra's work in Mathematics is very good'. Not sure that was very true, but . . .'Sandra is very fluent and confident in her speech and drama activities'. Bingo! My heartland. See the comment

**Figure 2.** Sandra Gattenhof Year 3 Report Card. Image supplied by the author.

about handwriting? To this day my handwriting is very neat.And then the final page.Can you see it? 'She enjoys P.E. but has not yet mastered headstands'. Clanger.

To be honest P.E. has never been my thing and in fact what I liked most about P.E. was the team ball games – Tunnel Ball, Leader Ball and Unders and Overs. I didn't like the competition, and clearly yoga was not going to be a part of my life's engagement. My other observation of this comment is my preference to undertake activities that were evidentially practical and pragmatic. Again, a trait that survives with me until today. I probably saw little or no reason to experience the world upside down, so I just didn't try. What this comment said to me, is that I have choices about how I wish to view the world and move through the world with others. This comment, this perspective, this choice of view has informed all my other 'accidents in learning'. Those moments when you understand something even though you didn't set out to try to understand anything. In
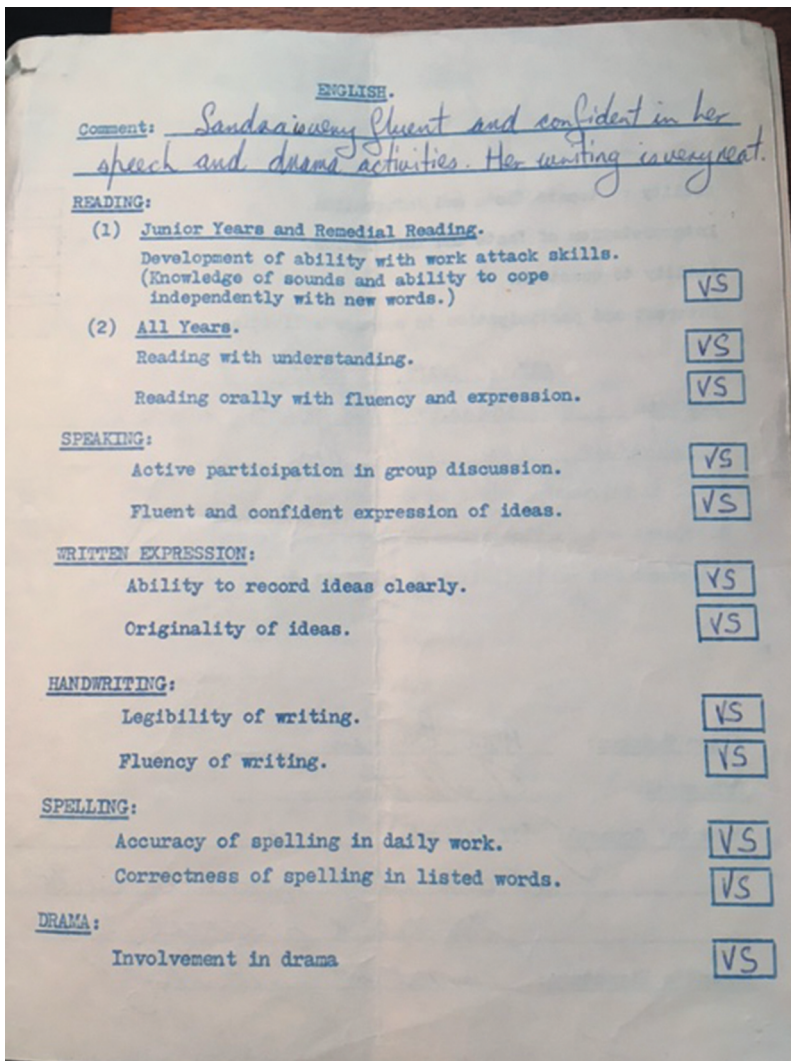
**Figure 3.** Sandra Gattenhof Year 3 Report Card. Image supplied by the author.

contemporary education lexicon you would call this 'just in time learning'. I choose to call it serendipity.

## Learning about art, culture and creativity

From here I want to share with you a few accidents in learning that have come from my research in varied communities – drama for early years learners, arts projects in low socio-economic communities, working with teaching artists, evaluations of arts engagement with Australian cultural organisations, and three current arts research projects – *Regional Arts and Social Impact* working with communities on Iningai Country in Central Western Queensland and palawa country in lutruwita (Tasmania), *Valuing the Arts in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand* for Australia Council for the Arts and Ministry of Culture and

**Figure 4.** Sandra Gattenhof Year 3 Report Card final page. Image supplied by the author.

Heritage New Zealand, and the most recently commenced project around *Social Impact Evaluation* with the Puuya Foundation in Lockhart River in Far North Queensland.

The accidents in learning are not drama specific but are couched in the macrosphere of arts and cultural engagement in which drama and theatre are significant parts. The reason for taking this expanded view is that more than 30 years of focussed research in Australia and internationally tells us that the majority of arts and cultural engagement, whether in a school or in societal contexts, result in improvements in self-esteem, connection, well-being, knowledge creation and knowledge extension, cultural maintenance, creative problem-solving, imaginative responsiveness and awareness of self in concert with others. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed a great deal about our societies, our collective wellbeing, and how urgent the choices we make now are for our futures. There has been a great deal of discussion about the value of the arts in our lives at this time. Rightly, it has

been pointed out that during this profound disruption, arts and entertainment has been a lifeline for many.

It is tempting, particularly in a time of relentless uncertainty, to continue to revert to established arguments or accepted ways of doing rather than taking this opportunity to present radical new ways of considering arts, culture and creativity and their role in charting a path forward. In 2020, Arundhati Roy wrote an essay called *The Pandemic Is a Portal*, in which she suggested that this is an opportunity to remake the future. She says,

> We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers, our smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it (Roy, 2020, n.p.).

Or as leadership guru Simon Sinek (2016, p. 45) says, "[i]f the challenge we face doesn't scare us,

then it's probably not that important". For me this challenge and reimagining comes down to words. To a language that speaks of the impact and value of arts and cultural engagement that is inclusive and easily understood at all levels of our community including government. In looking for commonalities across my research and projects over the past ten years I can see three accidents in learning:

(1) The need to develop comprehensive and contemporary language frameworks to account for a multiplicity of understandings related to the value and impact of arts and culture across diverse communities.
(2) The need to advance the understanding and approaches to design and implementation of assessment frameworks to gauge the value and impact of arts engagement with a focus on wellbeing, public value and social inclusion.
(3) The need to develop clear and relatable understandings about the impact and value of arts engagement to identify success factors.

Yes, there have been previous attempts to develop languages and I will share some with you in this presentation. But the real issue is communication. Wesley Enoch (2020, p. 7) stated in *The Saturday Paper* last year that,

> [m]etrics for success are already skewing from qualitative to quantitative. In coming years, this will continue unabated, with impact measured by numbers of eyeballs engaged in transitory exposure or mass distraction rather than deep connection, community development and risk.

This disconnect between the impact of arts and culture on individuals and communities, and what is measured, will continue without leadership from the sector. At this moment of interruption, we have an opportunity to develop a new discourse about what the arts contribute, how the contribution can be described, and what opportunities exist to assist to communicate outcomes of arts engagement in Australia. Why is this important? It is important to all of us because the current language frameworks have not cut through. Particularly not to governments where we have seen a continued erosion in arts funding, and in 2020 a slow and inadequate government response to the devastation of income

loss experienced by freelance artists and arts companies with the resultant effect of moving some towards possible extinction.

## Frameworks for understanding the impact of art, culture and creativity

Knell and Taylor (2011, p. 19) argue for,

> more effective measurement of intrinsic value, which connects that measurement directly to the public's experience of culture and what they value. Otherwise the danger is that difficult to measure benefits – such as the aesthetic, spiritual or social – will continue to be under-emphasised in policymakers.

Others before me have begun thinking through these language attribution matters as it applies to arts and culture. By way of example, the following three frameworks have been developed to attempt to frame the language for intrinsic impact assessment markers, and chart change as a result of a cultural experience. These frameworks attempt to respond to Brown and Trimboli's (2011, p. 617) call for impact evaluations that demonstrate 'alterations in the quality of life'. While no single framework offers a complete set of indicators to capture impact in terms of public value, wellbeing and social cohesion, across the three frameworks there are languages to move impact evaluation beyond numeric data and into the field of human experience.

Drawing on considerable work as evaluators of the impact of live performance for audience members across the US, Canada and Australia, Brown and Novak-Leonard (2013) language framework employs an affective and place-based approach to accounting for outcomes. Brown and Novak-Leonard set out to 'measure the short-term intrinsic impacts of audience members' aesthetic experience at a performing arts program' (Brown and Novak-Leonard, 2013, p. 224). The research attempted to 'capture the immediacy of the experience' (ibid.). Part of the research was to 'capture what audience members could self-report within 24 hours after their audience experience' (ibid.). Sample questions included:

(1) To what degree were you absorbed in the performance?
(2) To what extent did the performance serve to celebrate and sustain your own cultural heritage? (Brown and Novak-Leonard, 2013, p. 227).

Collating the response words from audience members allowed Brown and Novak-Leonard to shape the six impact statements you see on the left-hand slide of the table. I present Brown and Novak-Leonard's framework (Brown and Novak-Leonard, 2013, pp. 227–228) as a table here for easier comparison with the following two frameworks.

The downside of this framework is that it is focused on outcomes from an audience perspective, or what Dunphy et al. (Dunphy et al., 2020, p. 479) describe as 'receptive engagement rather than the full spectrum from receptive right through to creative participation'. That is, 'it does not enable a complete measurement of outcomes' (ibid.).

In Table 2, the measurable cultural (intrinsic) outcomes of engagement in cultural development activities have similar framing to Brown and Novak-Leonard (2013). Smithies and Uppal's framework (2019) has been developed as part of their research through the Cultural Development Network based at RMIT University in Melbourne. Similarly to how I have presented Framework One, I draw from Smithies and Uppal

(2019, p. 152) in Framework Two and present their ideas in a table format. Framework Two engages cognitive and emotive language to account for impact and uses a place-based focus to outline impact which can be described as belonging. The framework has been trialled in Australian and international contexts and was developed in response to the challenge of identifying language to account for the ' ... intangible nature of cultural activities that makes them inherently unmeasurable, while their "intrinsic" properties render them essentially valuable' (Dunphy et al., 2020, p. 474). Commentary on the framework notes that,

> the first three outcomes need to be elicited before the last two can occur: *creativity* needs to be stimulated, *aesthetic enrichment* experienced, or *insights* gained, before *diverse cultural forms* can be appreciated, or *cultural belonging* deepened. The first three outcomes are also alike because they are about individuals' internal experience and relationship with themselves ... The fourth and fifth outcomes, *appreciation* and *belonging*, are about a person's relationship with others and the world around them ... The fourth and fifth outcomes also contrast to the previous three in elucidating the ways an individual might identify with others, rather than having a unique internal experience. (Dunphy et al., 2020, p. 487)

The Smithies and Uppal framework overtly uses arts-based language and aesthetic disposition to account for the impact of the arts and cultural experience by individuals and communities.

Other indicators of impact can be borrowed from indices developed outside of the cultural sphere, such as Daisy Fancourt's discussion of the impact of arts in health (Fancourt, 2017; Fancourt and Finn, 2019), adapted in Table 1. Aligning with the approach to presenting the previous two frameworks, I adapt Fancourt's ideas (Fancourt, 2017; Fancourt and Finn, 2019, p. 3) to present them as an easily comparable table. Notably, the first five indicators in the cell titled *1) Components* are framed through affective language and have similarities to both Brown and Novak-Leonard's language framework (Table 2) and Smithies and Uppal's measurable cultural (intrinsic) outcomes (Table 2). The responses in Fancourt's ideas (Fancourt, 2017; Fancourt and Finn, 2019), presented here in Table 3, are framed in a salutogenesis approach. That is, an approach focusing on factors that support human health and wellbeing, rather than on factors that cause disease (pathogenesis). Of particular note is that the model includes social outcomes that point to an indicator of social cohesion.

What is noticeable across all three frameworks is the overt use of language and concepts associated with arts and cultural engagement. They are effectively using the language of the arts to report on the impact of the arts.

## Apply the frameworks to engagement in art, culture and creativity

In my recently completed research called *Valuing the Arts in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand*, the research team and I put the three frameworks into conversation to see what they showed. Across the interviews the research participants offered a variety of words and concepts that may be used to reframe the value question. When asked to identify three words that describe value for the communities in which they work the responses in the left-hand column were given see Table 4.

The words the research participants offer show a similarity to the words and dispositions in frameworks already available. By aligning the three frameworks the correlations

**Table 1.** Framework One: Alan Brown and Jennifer Novak-Leonard. (Table adapted from Brown and Novak-Leonard, 2013, pp. 227–228).

| | |
|---|---|
| 1) Art as a Means of Feeling | captures the audience member's engagement in the arts experience by considering their feelings of aliveness, being emotionally charged, and absorbed in the moment. |
| 2) Art as a Means of Social Bonding & Bridging | involves the connectedness that can emerge from arts experiences, both in an individual sense (with regards to self-understanding and identity construction) and in a community sense (with regards to community pride, including gaining an understanding of people different to yourself). |
| 3) Art as a Means of Aesthetic Development & Creative Stimulation | encapsulates outcomes associated with exposure to new art, artists or artistic styles and forms to progress an individual's understanding of the context of art, regardless of the individual's taste. This makes clear the value of aesthetic exposure. |
| 4) Art as a Means of Learning & Thinking | speaks to the gathering and interpreting of new information about an issue, idea, or culture. It relates to the art's *content* and how it might challenge or provoke new thinking. |

**Table 2.** Framework Two: John Smithies and Surajen Uppal. (Table adapted from Smithies and Uppal 2019, p. 152).

| | |
|---|---|
| 1) Has creativity been stimulated? | Increased desire to participate or create new cultural works by igniting imagination and curiosity. |
| 2) Has an aesthetic enrichment been experienced? | Non-typical experiences (often moving experiences sparked by beauty, joy, awe, discomfort or wonder) that engage the senses to take an individual out of their everyday experience. |
| 3) Has new knowledge, insight and new ideas been gained? | Stimulating the mind, deeper understanding, and critical and creative thinking and reflection. |
| 4) Has the diversity of cultural expression been appreciated? | Appreciation of diverse cultural expressions and the way these interact with each other. |
| 5) Has a sense of belonging to a shared cultural heritage deepened? | Providing context to the present and visions of the future by considering the past, including history and heritage. |

**Table 3.** Framework Three: Daisy Fancourt. (Table adapted from Chapter Four in Fancourt, 2017 and subsequent work in; Fancourt and Finn, 2019, p. 3).

| | |
|---|---|
| 1) Aesthetic | Components engagement; involvement of the imagination; sensory activation; evocation of emotion; cognitive stimulation; social interaction; physical activity; engagement with themes of health; interaction with health-care settings |
| 2) Responses | Psychological; physiological; social; behavioural |
| 3) Outcomes | Prevention; promotion; management; treatment |

show that the dominant value participants identify is located in social bonding and bridging that allows individuals and communities to connect and belong, shape identities and celebrate civic pride. Overall, research participants align arts and cultural engagement with 'social interaction, enhanced social support and improved social behaviours' (Fancourt and Finn, 2019, p. 3).

Using the words of the participants to articulate impact and value may disrupt the dominant frame of intrinsic and instrumental value that we have used to talk about the outcomes of arts and cultural engagement. We need to embrace words and concepts that everyone can understand not just those inside the tent of arts and culture otherwise we will find ourselves possibly continuing the elitist, exclusionary and colonial narratives that have dominated the discourse.

**Table 4.** Gattenhof, Hancox, Rakena, Baron & Mackay Valuing the Arts in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand (Gattenhof et al., 2021).

| Participant Framing | Framework Brown and Novak-Leonard (2013) | Framework Smithies and Uppal (2019) | Framework Fancourt and Finn (2019) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Beauty<br>  Quality<br>  Deep engagement | Art as a means of feeling | Has an aesthetic enrichment been experienced? | Aesthetic engagement and evocation of emotion |
| Access<br>  Reach<br>  Visibility<br>  Empowerment<br>  Ripple effect<br>  Relationship<br>  Ecosystem<br>  Active participation<br>  Reclaiming<br>  Building self-esteem/ confidence<br>  Opportunity<br>  Belonging<br>  Dialogue<br>  Cohesion<br>  Talanoa<br>  Fono<br>  Creating space for voice<br>  Solidarity<br>  Inclusion<br>  Identity/representation<br>  Integrity of relationships<br>  Wellbeing/wellness<br>  Equitable, healthy and sustainable communities<br>  Community engagement<br>  Social infrastructure | Art as a means of social bonding and bridging | Has a sense of belonging to a shared cultural heritage deepened?<br>Has the diversity of cultural expression been appreciated? | Social interaction, enhanced social support and improved social behaviours |
| Story<br>  Embodying<br>  Imagining | Art as a means of aesthetic development and creative stimulation | Has creativity been stimulated? | Involvement of the imagination |
| Knowledge<br>  Culture<br>  Maintaining language<br>  Exchange<br>  Self-discovery<br>  Collaboration | Art as a means of learning and thinking | Has new knowledge, insight and new ideas been gained? | Cognitive stimulation |

Looking at my research over the last three years I can see opportunities for how we might expand language attribution about outcomes for individuals and communities arising from arts and cultural engagement. Six key findings are emerging from the research:

(1) **Understanding value –** the term value may be a limiting concept when ascribing impact. The notion of cultural or public value is complex and divisive with opinions falling into two broad themes: economic and non-economic. The dominant understanding, economic value, includes the measurement of worth; the dollar value of art, and the measurement of quality; and value for money. The current economic environment has sharpened discussions and sees us entering a moment where measurement and attribution of value is seen as critically important. The economic

lens has the ability to diminish the efficacy of arts and cultural engagement related to social outcomes or social impact. The attribution of value outside an economic frame can be described as: value as cultural maintenance; value as identity creation and representation; value as (re)imagining places and futures; and value as a safe space for questioning structures and social norms. Ben Cameron (2009) argues that arts organisations needed to rethink their relationship with communities and individuals. Cameron believes that arts organisations must revise the nature of the cultural task. He says that arts organisations can no longer afford to 'think of themselves as producers or presenters of cultural product, rather they are orchestrators of social interaction with communities who are seeking opportunities for interactivity, participation, access and engagement' (Cameron, 2009, n.p.).

(2) **Stretch the definition of value to include impact** The research demonstrates that there is an opportunity to enhance the notion of value by including impact. The research shows that these terms are currently understood to be interchangeable and proxies for each other. Using impact alongside value may counter subjectivity aligned with value. Impact is viewed as more people-centred than value, as well as being an active embodiment of outcomes. Frameworks that allow for the attribution of both individual impact and collective impact, 'that go beyond the artefacts and the enactments of the event or performance itself and have a continuing influence upon and directly touch people's lives' (Landry et al., 1995, p. 23) are needed.

(3) **Art, culture and creativity** – expanding the frame of arts and culture to include the notion of creativity allows for the valuing and representation of culture and cultural practices that are place-based and inclusive of ritual, custom and story-telling that express people and place as well as what is valuable and meaningful. Using the term 'creativity' may break down perceived barriers of elitism ascribed to the term 'arts'. The research highlights the need to use the words 'arts' and 'culture' together rather than referring to one entity or another in the singular. This position is a key finding identified in A New Approach's 2020 report that notes, '[t]he word "arts" alone prompts imagery of the high arts, which are seen as elitist and as being more for other (wealthier) people, not them' (Fielding and Trembath, 2020, p. 7). Research participants from the *Valuing the Arts in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand* project (2020) express the need to make arts framing more inclusive of peoples and practices and proffer the position of adding the term creativity. One Pasifika interviewee, a director of an arts institution in Aotearoa New Zealand noted that 'the word "arts" is perceived as a very European concept and is almost elitist. It seems to be something that only some people can do, [that is] be an artist' (Gattenhof et al., 2021, in press). From an Aboriginal point of view, a significant Indigenous Australian art-maker said that, 'art is very insipid as an English word. It does not really explain the truth, volume or spirit of our culture' (ibid.). Using the term creativity as part of the lexicon opens up avenues of practice and meaning in a more inclusive way. For the research participants in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand the word art implied form-based whereas creativity is experiential.

(4) **Connection between arts engagement and wellbeing** – Arts, cultural and creative activities support social cohesion through ameliorating a sense of isolation from others, fostering interaction and connection with others, greater participation

in society, and an increased sense of shared identity and belonging (Brownett, 2018, p. 77; Fancourt and Finn, 2019, p. 9).

The research demonstrates a need for coordinated and meaningful collaboration between arts organisations and agencies, authentic engagement with communities, and arts-led approaches to fostering enduring social change as key to wellbeing for individuals and communities.

(1) **Social inclusion –** there is a strong connection between wellbeing and social inclusion created through arts engagement. The dominant value of arts and cultural engagement is located in social bonding and bridging that allows individuals and communities to develop a 'sense of connectedness, self-understanding and identity construction, as well as a sense of belonging with, or pride in, one's community' (Brown and Novak-Leonard, 2013, p. 227). The value and impact ascribed to the intersection between engagement in arts, culture and creativity can be expressed as a diversity of 'cultural expression and a sense of continuity with the past, and a pathway to the future' (Smithies and Uppal, 2019, p. 152).
(2) **People-centred impact models –** there is a need to develop impact assessment models that are people-centred and have flexibility to be shaped by end-user defined outcomes. Developing people-centred models may ensure that impact and change is not only articulated through the goals of funders or delivery organisations but is understood by the people participating in arts, culture and creativity. Using evaluation approaches that go beyond audience, subsidy and economic modelling can build a more comprehensive picture of the transformative potentials for individuals and communities.

## Mastering headstands

My central accident in learning is simple. We need to reimagine ways we communicate creative and cultural experiences both in schools, in the community, and to government. Using evaluation approaches that go beyond numbers can build a more comprehensive picture of the transformative potentials of arts and culture for individuals and communities. More nuanced approaches and models, that can include local voices, embrace Indigenous ways of knowing and being, ascribe worth to locally-relevant indicators of success, and encompass multiple – both tangible and intangible – understandings of value and impact, are urgently needed. To do this work I may need to master headstands. I am forever hopeful that research that I have the good fortune to undertake collaboratively with arts organisations may offer languages which will reconfigure the understanding of engagement in arts, culture and creativity with the outcome of upending the dialogue beyond numeric data and returning the dialogue back into the field of human experience.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

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