Evaluation's Contributions to Building a Movement: Lessons from the Seeding *Vitality Arts* Initiative

By David Scheie and Lindsay Lewis[1]
November 15, 2019

Introduction

A movement is underway in this country to transform attitudes toward and opportunities for older adults. This movement recognizes that older people are lifelong learners with tremendous creative abilities, and that high-quality, participatory arts learning programs can enhance their vitality. Aroha Philanthropies, a national foundation based in Minneapolis, is working to build this movement. Aroha supports the development of artistic and creative opportunities, and the personal discoveries that go with them, for everyone. Its mission is to awaken creative expression and build communities particularly for children and youth, adults aged 55+, and adults with mental illness. As part of this, Aroha launched the Seeding *Vitality Arts®* initiative in 2016.

This initiative includes an evaluation component with features chosen for their movement-building relevance. The evaluation provides an example of how to build organizations' capacity to collect, analyze and use evaluation data while also delivering overall national reports from an external evaluation consultant. This paper tells the story of this initiative and its evaluation, with a goal of illuminating how evaluation can contribute to a movement that has attitudinal, organizational and systemic dimensions.

Overview of the Seeding *Vitality Arts* initiative

Aroha Philanthropies developed a major, multi-year initiative, Seeding *Vitality Arts*, in 2016. *Vitality Arts* (or creative aging) programs provide older adults with a renewed sense of purpose, improved wellbeing, connection with others, and joy. They do this by inspiring older adults to learn, make and share the arts in an environment that sparks creativity, fosters friendships and builds community. Aroha's goals for Seeding *Vitality Arts* are to:

- Change the narrative about aging from being focused on decline to including older adults' potential for growth and desire to be challenged.
- Demonstrate the power and impact of creative aging programs to a broad audience at both national and statewide levels.
- Encourage and equip arts and cultural organizations to develop participatory arts education programs for older adults.
- Encourage and equip organizations that serve older adults to develop arts education programs.
- Disseminate effective program implementation models.

---

[1] David Scheie is president of Touchstone Center for Collaborative Inquiry. Lindsay Lewis is Program Manager for Aroha Philanthropies.

Seeding *Vitality Arts* uses a cohort learning model. Fifteen organizations nationwide were chosen for the U.S. cohort in 2016, from an applicant pool of over 200 organizations. Another 15 organizations within Minnesota were chosen in 2017 for the Minnesota cohort, from an eligible pool of 60 organizations. As part of its movement-building aspiration, Aroha wanted to explore and demonstrate the impact of creative aging programs in a wide variety of community and organizational settings: urban, suburban and rural; diverse and culturally specific communities; in various geographic regions; and organizations of diverse types and sizes. The 30 organizations selected included 20 arts or cultural organizations, eight elder-focused housing or service organizations, plus a high school and a YMCA. They are located from New Hampshire to California, in settings ranging from New York City to Dawson, Minnesota (population 1,526 near the South Dakota border).

Grantees in both cohorts were equipped with tools for creating highly successful programs including:

- Two years of funding for sequential, skill-based arts education workshop series of eight sessions or more.
- Extensive in-person training and ongoing technical – and transformational – assistance from New York-based Lifetime Arts, the premier service organization in creative aging.
- An evaluation protocol developed and implemented by Touchstone Center for Collaborative Inquiry, a Minneapolis-based firm. Touchstone created participant and audience outcome surveys, gathered the perspectives of program coordinators and teaching artists through interviews and observations, and helped grantees strengthen their capacity to tell their stories using the data collected.
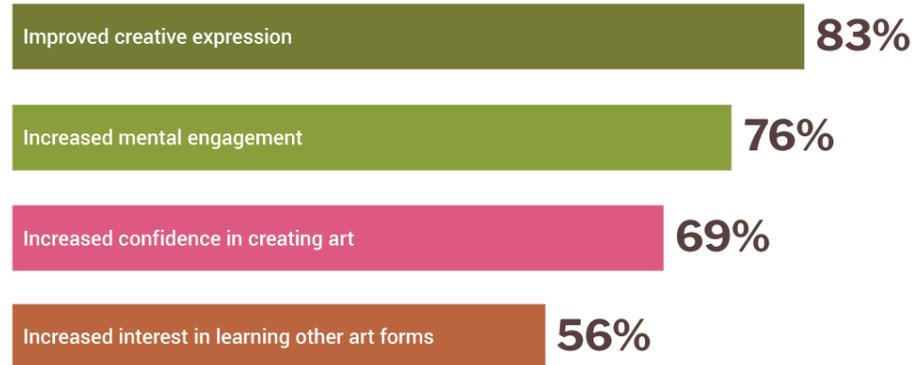

The role of evaluation

Including evaluation as a core component of the initiative was a critical piece of Aroha's strategy to build the movement. Seeding *Vitality Arts* set out to seed successful programs and seed the narrative across the country with new dialogue. In order to impact the narrative, Aroha needed to gather evidence that these programs were making an undeniable impact on the participants and organizations. Engaging Touchstone as a partner throughout the grant process provided significant insight along the way and brought in an unbiased voice. Grantees felt comfortable sharing successes and challenges with Touchstone including when aspects of the grant requirements were unnecessarily taxing.
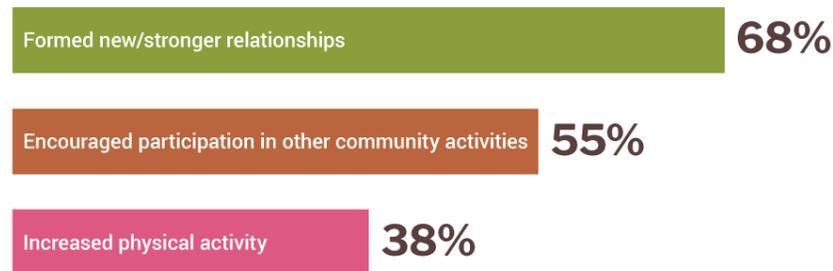
The SVA evaluation's Post Program Participant Survey generates quantitative data showing impact on participants' creativity and mental engagement, artistic development, and social and physical gains. These results can be displayed crisply in a few colorful bar charts, as shown below.[2]

---

[2] These displays are based on Post-Program Participant Surveys completed in 2017-2018 by 1,662 participants in 167 different *Vitality Arts* programs across the U.S. and Minnesota cohorts.

Increased Creativity + Mental Engagement

Improved creative expression	**83%**
Increased mental engagement	**76%**
Increased confidence in creating art	**69%**
Increased interest in learning other art forms	**56%**

Social + Physical Gains

Formed new/stronger relationships	**68%**
Encouraged participation in other community activities	**55%**
Increased physical activity	**38%**

Growth in the Art Form

Increased skills	**79%**
Increased knowledge and appreciation	**80%**
Increased interest in knowing more	**77%**

Developing leaders

The evaluation generates data displays for each organization as well as the initiative in aggregate, to equip grantee leaders to tell the story of their *Vitality Arts* work in the context of the national initiative's overall impact. This way, they can see and tell their story as part of a national movement and see themselves as leaders of and contributors to this national movement. Getting to the next step – providing leadership, engaging others -- is challenging. Encouraging grantees to use their evaluations to "tell their story" to a variety of audiences is one strategy.

In its collaborative, participatory design, program coordinators use evaluation tools to collect data, interpret data findings with the initiative's evaluators, use evaluation data findings to write their post program reports, and provide critical feedback to help improve evaluation tools. Grantees are given an Evaluation Toolkit, called "Telling Your Story with Evidence," that includes tools for conducting interviews and focus groups in addition to the required surveys and coordinator reports. It also provides guidelines for analyzing and interpreting data and using data to tell their story. This builds grantees' skills at designing and conducting evaluation and at using evaluation-generated data for internal improvement and external communications.

Interview guides used with grantee leaders and teaching artists include reflective questions that encourage them to think of themselves as pioneers and leaders in this movement, and that gather their ideas about how to build this movement further. Touchstone evaluators had previous experience with creative aging projects and with foundation initiatives that aimed to strengthen fields and movements. They also had deep experience in learning facilitation. This combination helped them engage initiative sponsors, grantee leaders and teaching artists as thought partners on behalf of the initiative and its movement-building aspirations – asking questions that might stretch initiative leaders' thinking. In interviews they were alert to what to listen for, where to probe, and how to speak the language of the people being interviewed.

Telling the story

The initiative evaluators also generate national reports that combine quantitative and qualitative evidence from multiple sources. These draw on data collected by grantees plus interviews conducted by initiative evaluators with program coordinators, administrators, teaching artists, program participants and some participants' family members. Evaluators visited each grantee at least once, and they observed a sample of program sessions and culminating events at each site. The interviews and observations allow inquiry into how results are achieved, the contexts in which grantees work, and what the challenges and success factors are in this work. This learning puts flesh on the bones of survey findings and enables richer, more nuanced and informative evaluation reports that illuminate results and lessons for improving grantee efforts and for building the national movement.

Evaluation plays a role in another movement-building feature of the Seeding *Vitality Arts* initiative: its periodic convenings of grantee leaders (approximately every 15 months). At these gatherings, evaluation findings and recommendations are presented and explored. This is to increase grantee leaders' fluency with the evaluation's results, and to provide a springboard for them to think and talk about how they can solidify their gains locally and how they, as field leaders, can build this movement further. At these gatherings, Touchstone received feedback

about the evaluation tools, which in turn helped us to make modifications and streamline the process.

Hearing from Touchstone about the impressive data gathered from the grantees' programs allows the grantees to celebrate their achievements together. It boosts the narrative they are building at their organization and the case they are making with other funders. Grantees expressed interest in seeing their data within the larger aggregate.

Equipping Aroha

As Aroha continues to make the case for *Vitality Arts* programming across the country, the mounting evidence generated from the data collected by Touchstone has been of significant value.

Two major partnerships have developed that promise to grow the movement. Aroha and the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA) are collaborating to explore how NASAA and state arts agencies can accelerate the creative aging movement across the country. Aroha and the National Guild for Community Arts Education launched a new initiative entitled "Building a Creative Aging Movement." This visionary effort aims to foster well-funded, comprehensive creative aging programs through training and networking opportunities, leadership development and advocacy.

As part of that initiative, the Guild announced the opening of a third round of its training and capacity-building program, "Catalyzing Creative Aging." Twenty Guild members have been selected to receive support in developing individualized action plans to establish and sustain their programs and will be eligible to apply for seed funding.

Evaluation site visits also have helped Aroha and its technical assistance partner, Lifetime Arts, which do not visit every grantee. The evaluation visits enable the evaluator to learn in-depth about grantees and their contexts which equips the evaluator to provide helpful insights to Aroha and Lifetime Arts as they seek to effectively assist grantees and translate grantees' experience into lessons for other organizations elsewhere.

Limitations and challenges with the SVA evaluation design

As with most evaluations, the SVA evaluation strives to be both useful, and simple, and frugal. This is an artful and often challenging balancing act.

One limitation is that the quantitative participant impact data is simple, relying on self-reporting by participants at the conclusion of programs. We experimented with a pre-post survey design in 2017, but its findings were inconclusive. Because of this, and to reduce the workload for coordinators who had to administer surveys, we scaled back to a simple post-program survey in 2018.

Evidence from this kind of survey might seem thin for initiatives in other sectors that have more robust traditions of quantitative data and analysis such as health, k-12 education, economics and engineering. However, we found that for many arts organizations, this simple survey

strategy offered a great leap forward in their ability to show crisp, quantifiable evidence of their programs' impact.

Choosing to rely on program coordinators across 30 organizations to administer surveys and to produce post-program reports that drew on survey results involved a fair amount of coordination and support. Coordinators varied in their skill and experience level and in their appetite and time availability for these tasks. Each year it has been a challenge to cheerlead, hand-hold, troubleshoot and otherwise coax all the coordinators to collect and turn in all their data so that we could do the statewide and national data analyses. Occasionally, the evaluators have had to ask the funder to nudge grantees to follow through on these commitments.

Collecting audience surveys at culminating events, in particular, required effort and ingenuity from coordinators since these audience members weren't as "captive" as program participants were.

This evaluation design generated only limited evidence regarding these programs' impact on the broader community, such as changing the narrative about aging and older adults. The culminating event audience surveys were important because they provided some evidence on this topic. A stronger design would have collected more, though, perhaps through interviews with informants from the broader community.

Another tension has been in recognizing where to focus and when to say "enough" in data analysis, particularly as our data set grew. In 2018, when our cumulative survey data set expanded from 756 to 1,698 participant surveys, we were able to identify some intriguing patterns: for example, participants in dance and movement classes were more likely to report social growth than were participants in classes in other art forms. The data also showed that reported social outcomes were greater in classes with greater racial or ethnic diversity.

Fascinating as these discoveries were, to stay within our budget and our timelines for producing and sharing findings we had to limit our data analyses. We tried to strike a wise balance between micro-analysis of data details and focusing on the broader movement-building aims of the initiative.

While we believe the initiative's strategy of building grantees' skills at using evaluation data to tell their story powerfully is a smart component of developing leadership for the creative aging movement, we found that grantee leaders varied widely in their appetite for this. Many had not thought much in these terms before. The evaluators were willing and available to help grantee leaders get better at this, but very few asked for coaching in this aspect of evaluation utilization.

Conclusion

Evaluation is integral to Seeding *Vitality Arts*. It contributes to movement-building goals by generating evidence of program benefits; by enabling this programming to be better understood and replicated; by informing improvements at multiple levels; and by building organizations' capacity to conduct and use evaluation.

Thanks to fairly simple survey methodology, the evaluation is generating clear, quantitative evidence of the benefits of creative aging programs to participants both at individual organizations and for statewide and national cohorts of organizations overall. The arts and cultural organizations, in particular, have expressed appreciation for these quantitative results data which are uncommon in the arts world.

The evaluation combines surveys of participants and of audience members at programs' culminating events with interviews, focus groups and observational data collected partly by organizations' staff and partly by external evaluators. These qualitative data help to make meaning of the survey data and allow organizations and national sponsors to tell the story of impact for individuals and organizations more richly and vividly. These methods also illuminate how programs achieve results, what the challenges are, and emerging lessons for achieving program success and sustainability.

The evaluation provides an example of how to build organizations' capacity to collect, analyze and use evaluation data while also delivering overall national reports from an external evaluation consultant. Using evaluators with experience in creative aging and in field-building initiatives, and who were nimble, integrative thinkers experienced in the arts of reflective interviews and learning facilitation as well as survey administration and analysis, has helped this evaluation deliver value to the sponsor and to grantees, and contribute to the movement-building goal.

This approach has helped to develop multiple leaders and messengers for the creative aging movement from a diverse mix of organizations from throughout the country. And it has equipped the initiative sponsor with evidence – both compelling numbers and vivid stories – that helps them develop partners, attract further resources and build momentum for this movement.

Scheie, D., & Lewis, L. (2019) *Evaluation's Contributions to Building a Movement: Lessons from the Seeding* Vitality Arts *Initiative*. Paper presented at American Evaluation Association 2019 Annual Conference.