



AHRC Cultural Value Podcast Transcript

Chris Jameson:

You're listening to a podcast from the Arts and Humanities Research Council. Hello, I'm Chris Jameson. With the aim of making a major contribution to how we think about the value arts and culture to individuals and society, we're talking today about the AHRC's 'Cultural Value' project. Over the next two years it will seek to establish a framework that will advance the way we talk about the value of cultural engagement and, crucially, the methods by which we evaluate that value. It's a big, big ask. Let's meet the people who are undertaking it.

Prof. Geoff Crossick:

Hello, I'm Geoff Crossick and I'm the Director of the 'Cultural Value' project.

Patrycja Kaszynska:

Hello, my name is Patrycja Kaszynska and I'm the Project Researcher.

Chris Jameson:

Our starting point for this podcast is late September 2012 and Geoff, the bells are ringing in a church square in Bologna.

Prof. Geoff Crossick:

They are indeed and I was there with my wife, Rita, for a weekend. I'd only just been appointed as Director of the 'Cultural Value' project. There was a band playing and I thought, 'It's a brass band,' but as we wandered over towards it, it wasn't a brass band. It was actually a band of rather serious musicians and they started peeling off in different directions around the square playing, as if they were speaking to each other across the square, and we were captivated and we watched it the way you are when you see a piece of art going on in public and you don't know what's going on. After a while, they gathered back together and they started setting off towards the church. Pied-piper-like we went with as well and in the church was an enormous choir and for half-an-hour there was a mesmerising performance. We were completely bowled over by it and it turned out that it was a John Cage piece and we wandered out into the square and I know I should have just said, 'Let's go and have a beer,' but instead I said to Rita, 'That's what cultural value is all about! Something quite extraordinary has happened to us.'



Chris Jameson:

But isn't that a perfect example, in a way, of the difficulties of the task that lies ahead for you? How can you really establish how that experience changed you, how it might have made you more inspired or more productive, for instance?

Prof. Geoff Crossick:

I have no idea whether it made me more productive or made me more inspired. I do know that for hours to come, we kept talking about it. If we start from there, we can then go out to all the other, at times maybe a bit more prosaic influences that art and culture has on you: benefits to health, benefits to the economy, urban regeneration and so on. In our minds, the one we're most interested in as a starting point is what we're calling 'The Reflective Individual and the Engaged Citizen' and that is actually about the way in which people change: become more open, more understanding, more thoughtful in their society.

So there's that whole range of components and then we need to work out the evidence by which we analyse them. And some of them will be quantitative, you know, if you want to know whether people's mental health has been improved by exposure to art, you can actually do proper experiments but in other respects, we need lots of case studies with a lot of evidence: talking to people, using social media, using all kinds of ways of doing that.

Chris Jameson:

Because you say that in the past, none of the studies historically into the value of arts and culture has 'commanded widespread confidence'. Why is that and what is it that you're going to do differently?

Prof. Geoff Crossick:

Too often the methods that have been used have been to find the evidence that is believed will speak to the Government of the day and that has increasingly been the issue of economic impact and I think actually most people in the arts don't believe that's why they do it. I don't know anybody in the arts who does it directly to have an economic impact. Let's start somewhere else. Let's actually ask, what are the fundamental effects of arts and culture?

Chris Jameson:

So a ten-year-old who gets together with his mates in a garage and tries to put a couple of tunes together, this project is for them and about them?



Prof. Geoff Crossick:

Yes, of course it is. It is very much about people like that. It's about the totality of what goes on and the fact that they want to get together and put a couple of tunes together. Why? Why don't they just sit at home and go and kick a ball about? Why do they go and make music?

Chris Jameson:

Are you daunted by the task ahead of you?

Patrycja Kaszynska:

It's a huge challenge but this is what makes it immensely interesting. One of our objectives is to get a better understanding, put our finger down, on the benefits fundamentally, and I'm tempted to say, uniquely attached to culture and to my mind that has not been done successfully in the past.

Chris Jameson:

I suppose the really fascinating question is, might you conclude at the end of this study that the value of culture isn't worth the investment, financially or otherwise, that we put in?

Prof. Geoff Crossick:

That's always the possibility of any research, because like any research council we're open-minded about how the research is going to be done but the reality is that you're asking too simple a question, Chris.

Chris Jameson:

It hasn't been the first time someone's said that to me!

Prof. Geoff Crossick:

I'm sorry that I've kept that pattern going! But the fact is that there isn't one benefit to come from arts and culture. There's no way in which you could simply add up a single benefit and say, 'See, it's worth the money,' and what we want to do is to identify a range of components, of benefits, that society gets and to look at all of those and find ways of evidencing them and weighing them up, measuring them when that's appropriate, or finding really good case study evidence when measurement isn't the right way of finding it out, so we understand what's going on. It's then a judgement as to whether it's worth public funding.



Patrycja Kaszynska:

And in any case, what's the point of asking? Can you imagine a society totally devoid of cultural activities? They're here to stay and they have powerful impact on all of us. We need to understand this better.

Chris Jameson:

Some positive, some negative?

Patrycja Kaszynska:

Possibly.

Prof. Geoff Crossick:

Can I give an example of that?

Chris Jameson:

Please do.

Prof. Geoff Crossick:

The use of art and culture in post-conflict situations, in which one knows that in Bosnia or in Northern Ireland there's been a lot of use of art and culture to try not just to bring communities together but to make people start thinking about some of same issues through art. That's a positive use of art and culture but one could also say that in the build-up to those conflicts, art and culture played a very powerful role in dividing people and I think therefore we have to be very careful not to assume - and you rightly ask that question, Chris - not to assume that we're just simply looking for all the good stories. We need to recognise the nuances here. It's simply is not some superficial layer of society, it's something that has a very powerful influence on people and it's trying to understand it better.

Chris Jameson:

Thank you very much to Geoff Crossick and Patrycja Kaszynska. Thank you very much for listening and goodbye.