Developing outcome-based indicators: Resource's learning and access standard

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Resource: the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries provides strategic guidance, advice and advocacy across the whole of Government on museum, archive and library matters. It is a non-departmental public body sponsored by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in London. One of the strategic objects of Resource is to advise on best practice and the delivery of specific objectives. The purpose of indicators is to assess performance, monitor progress, and provide stakeholders with evidence about activities and services. Therefore, the use of, and need for, effective performance indicators that demonstrate the value and impact of our sectors, underlies one of Resource's key objectives for the year 2001/02, which is to "demonstrate the value of the sector through the publication of statistics and other evidence for advocacy purposes." Resource is a cross-sector organisation, and this paper therefore discusses museums and archives as well as libraries. Resource's current work in this field is in developing a learning and access standard for museums archives and libraries. Resource attaches great importance to access and learning, and this is an area that, in terms of standards, has been relatively underdeveloped in the three domains, which have tended in the past to focus on measuring their own internal activities. This standard is the focus of this paper.

This paper could not have been prepared without the help and co-operation of my two colleagues on the steering group for the Resource Learning and Access Standard, Sue Wilkinson at Resource, and Anne Murch, whose many papers written to further the standard's development I have freely plundered. Many thanks to both of them.

Introduction

Resource: the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries provides strategic guidance, advice and advocacy across the whole of Government on museum, archive and library matters. It is a non-departmental public body sponsored by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in London. It came into being in April 2000, inheriting staff and some functions from the Library and Information Commission (LIC) and the Museums & Galleries Commission (MGC). It operates independently from government. It has three strategic objectives:

- To provide strategic leadership and to promote change.

- To act as an authoritative advocate and champion for our sector.

- To advise on best practice and the delivery of specific objectives.

The first two of these require us to have both quantitative information about our domains and also qualitative information about the impact they have on people's lives. The third requires us to set and monitor standards. Therefore, the use of, and need for, effective performance indicators that demonstrate the value and impact of our sectors, underlies one of Resource's key objectives for the year 2001/02, which is to "demonstrate the value of the sector through the publication of statistics and other evidence for advocacy purposes." (Resource, 2001/2)

In the manifesto (Resource, 2000) it is recognised that independence from government is particularly crucial in the advocacy role, and the statistics and performance measures used must therefore be independently verifiable and robust.

Resource is a cross sectoral organisation and this paper therefore discusses museums and archives as well as libraries.

Developing outcome based performance indicators

The purpose of indicators is to assess performance, monitor progress, and provide stakeholders with evidence about activities and services. In the past, as we know, they have traditionally focused on things which can be counted up. Although these sorts of indicators provide much useful information their shortcoming is that they provide little indication of the impact services have on the lives of the people they are designed for and they do not effectively assess quality. Earlier work to remedy this was undertaken in the libraries sector by the LIC and the British Library Research and Innovation Centre, for example producing the report by François Matarasso, Learning Development. (Matarasso, 1998a) Details of the programme are still at present to be found on the LIC website (although this will be migrating to the Resource website in the near future).

(See http://www.lic.gov.uk/research/value_and_ impact/index.html)

Resource is now in discussion with the Audit Commission for England and Wales, the Local Government Association, the Office for National Statistics and cultural organisations such as the Arts Council of England, about better measures to demonstrate the value and impact of services. The Best Value Inspectorate, now nearing the end of its first full year of inspections, is moving towards looking at user outcomes rather than the more quantitative measures of cost, input and output which are currently being used. In 2000 the Audit Commission defined these as the:

Cost: Money spent to acquire the resources;

Input: Resources (staff, materials, premises) employed to provide the service;

Output: Service provided to the public, for example, in terms of tasks completed;

Outcome: Actual impact and value of the service delivery.

<div align="right">(Audit Commission, 2000)</div>

There is general agreement amongst all the organisations we have discussed this with that:

• Outcomes are the best measure to use to evaluate the value of the service to the user and the impact it has on their quality of life;

• Outcomes demonstrate that the service is one that ought to be provided and whether or not the service is achieving what it ought to achieve for the user;

• They are notoriously difficult to develop. In all the discussions we have had, particularly around the Resource cross sectoral standards for learning and access (more of which later), there has been support for the use of outcomes, but varying degrees of success in identifying them.

The commonality of this goal of outcome based indicators became particularly apparent at the June 2001 meeting of the UK Local Government Association Cultural Services Network where a round up of research being undertaken by organisations represented at the meeting showed a move, for example by Sport England, to undertaking research projects to develop toolkits to measure the impact of their activities. In libraries, a particular area of interest has been assessing the impact of their ICT provision. For example, the Value and Impact of IT Access in Libraries project (VITAL) (Eve and Brophy, 2001), carried out at Manchester Metropolitan University, developed a methodology for assessing impact, which was tested in three UK public library authorities. The test results indicated positive impacts on a range of users, in all three localities. The project also produced a Methodologies Workbook,

designed to help library organisations measure the impact of their IT services.

Another relevant project, *Longitude* (Library Networking Impact Toolkit for a User-Driven Environment) (http://www.earl.org.uk/longitude/ longitude1.html), is currently being funded by Resource. EARL, the Consortium for Public Library Networking, is undertaking this project with a number of partners, including three public library authorities. Longitude aims to develop and test a toolkit of qualitative survey methodologies to help understand user needs and behaviour in the digital library environment. A key aspect of the project is its longitudinal approach, designed to find the best means of monitoring computer use over time. In addition, the toolkit's cross-sectoral requirements, applicability, and transferability will be assessed through the participation of, and discussions with, representatives from archives and museums. When the project findings are published later this year, they will represent a big step forward, in that impact evaluation has tended to concentrate on the immediate impact rather than use over time. Both Longitude and VITAL are also significant in that they consider core services which are provided, and used, all the time, rather than particular projects.

The learning and access standard

Resource's current work in this field is in developing a learning and access standard for museums archives and libraries. Resource attaches great importance to access and learning, and this is an area that, in terms of standards, has been relatively underdeveloped in the three domains, which have tended in the past to focus on measuring their own internal activities. This standard is the focus of this paper.

Early in the development of the standard, a decision was taken to substitute "Learning" for "Education", in order to embrace informal and lifelong as well as taught learning, and to include explicitly "access", in recognition that while barriers to access in any form exist – physical, sensory, intellectual, cultural, attitudinal, social, skills-related, financial – learning is impeded.

Full details of the extensive consultation process Resource has undertaken are available in the framework paper which is available to view on our website at http://www.resource.gov.uk. (Resource, 2001) Some of the issues and common themes that emerged as a result of the consultation process include:

• Museums, archives and libraries welcomed the fact that they will be able to use a standard to measure, improve and be accountable for their performance as learning organisations;

• External recognition of this will position them squarely as providers of and contributors to learning, within possibly sceptical parent bodies (e.g., local authorities, where public libraries, museums

and record offices may not be placed within an Education or Lifelong learning department);

• A broad based and inclusive standard will better influence stakeholders, e.g., government departments, potential funders etc.;

• A user-focused standard will influence and encourage organisations that may hitherto have focused on collecting, storage and documentation rather than services to users.

The consultation also showed very decisively that a standard that focused on outcomes was also considered to be essential. A move away from quantitative, process driven indicators of input and output was felt to be timely. It also reflects thinking in UK local and central government as noted above, and, perhaps most notably, in the Best Value Inspection Service, a representative of which commented that our approach was "music to his ears".

Is a learning standard based on outcomes achievable?

The following concerns have been raised during the consultation:

> Learners or users will use a museum, library or archive with their own agendas and criteria of success. Existing survey work demonstrates that users will not always be conscious of their learning expectations or able to articulate them. Many will have no tangible sense of what they might hope to learn before an experience particularly when unstructured and informal, such as visiting an exhibition. This makes the task of identifying learning objectives and evaluating them very challenging.

Evaluation becomes more complex when longer-term learning outcomes are considered. For the individual these might include:

• Increased understanding or knowledge of a particular subject area or concept.

• Growing sense of identity as part of a group or community.

• Growth of self-esteem.

• Inspiration resulting in creativity.

Increased understanding of knowledge might be relatively straightforward to assess, by seeking feedback from users following a virtual or physical visit. It is far more difficult to apply measures that demonstrate the effect of a museum, library or archive experience in the remaining three points. This may only become apparent after some time. The specific impact of the museum, library or archive learning experience may be very subtle and difficult to define. Inevitably there is a danger that in attempting to define learning outcomes these become too narrow and simplistic, and focus on information or knowledge acquired.

A further issue is that most recent evaluation work has concentrated on measuring the impact of specific projects rather than assessing the learning impact of day-to-day activities in museums, libraries and archives (for example, the UK Libraries Change Lives award). (Matarasso, 1998b) One challenge in the development of a standard will be to identify outcomes and techniques to support the evaluation of learning in the broader organisational context.

To support the implementation of a learning standard a toolkit will be needed that will enable an organisation to assess broad learning outcomes for users and help to codify the anecdotal information that they gather into some kind of performance measure. The consultation exercise has identified the need for research to identify the types of questions or techniques that organisations can use to help them to gather this information consistently and reliably. This project is currently being commissioned by Resource, and will involve consultation with users and potential users as well as with professionals and relevant agencies and organisations. Support and training materials will also be produced to help services to use the toolkit.

Resource's approach to identifying outcomes

Outcomes for the user having been identified early in the development of the standard, the consultation period independently stressed the need for outcomes that identified the value and impact of our services. The framework paper therefore looked additionally at outcomes for the community and for the organisation. To assist consultees with conceptualising what these might look like, the framework paper produced a few examples. These were provided only as examples and were not intended to be taken as precursors to the finished standard. A few people concentrated on these examples rather than the general direction we were taking, which although unfortunate did illustrate the difficulty of the concept. It was obviously easier to look at examples than to reflect on the broad approach.

To assist with the process a steering group has been set up to keep the project team on track and to provide independent intellectual assessment of the development of the standard. The group's remit is to act as a think tank to develop the framework of the standard, to ensure that it represents the views and needs of museums, archives and libraries, and that it takes account of and adopts best practice within the sectors and from the wider cultural sector. To help achieve the latter, representatives from the Arts Council of England and the Reading Partnership (a library development agency which focuses on libraries' work with adult readers, and supports library advocacy, research and

partnership development), have been invited to join the think tank, joining key players from representative bodies within museums, archives and libraries.

In July 2001 a 2-day residential workshop was held to develop the framework for the standard, identifying good practice principles with examples taken from delegates' experiences, and also looking at broad outcomes for the organisation (museums, libraries and archives) and learners and communities. A key question during the workshop sought to identify what good practice might actually look like. The results were many and varied, and with varying degrees of ease in identifying what the indicators might be that would provide evidence of the outcomes.

In the US the Institute for Museum of Library Services has also been working on evaluating the impact of services, using outcome based evaluation. (IMLS, 1999) Their work looks at the benefits of measuring outcomes as "benefits or changes for individuals or populations" and provides a model of how this might be achieved. They define learning outcomes as achievements or changes in the following:

- Skills – the ability to do something new (a specific task or activity) or a development of an existing skill, e.g., drawing a still life, tying a knot, using a keyboard/the Internet;

- Knowledge/understanding – the year of a battle, how Van Gogh painted, how tidal systems work, what to plant where in your garden, establishing a fact that you have set out to research;

- Behaviour – reading more, visiting museums more frequently, talking to your children, signing up for courses, having a discussion, decrease in truancy;

- Attitude/awareness/feeling – greater tolerance of cultural difference, enjoying museums, greater confidence, increase in self-esteem, starting to like modern art;

- Status – becoming a Friend, achieving a qualification, becoming a volunteer, leading a community project; and,

- Life condition – greater involvement in the community, improved health, greater involvement in learning.

This work is very useful and interesting, and will certainly be something the research project should look at. Resource would, however, like to go still further and look at outcomes – benefits or changes – for organisations as well as for individuals and communities. This will assist in providing objective evaluation of the value and impact of libraries, museums or archives.

A structure for the standard

The framework for the standard has developed and moved forward at each stage of the consultation. Resource had been considering whether to adopt a stepped approach to the standard with a three level structure, which would allow for the range and variety of types of organisation, which might wish to adopt the standard. This approach was however discarded at the residential workshop. Dissatisfaction with the levels centred around a:

- Fundamental unhappiness with the idea that small organisations who could not get beyond Level 1 might be made to feel inferior;

- Concern that having three distinct levels would produce a silo effect and make it impossible for organisations to have gain credit for having done part of all or any of them, without necessarily completing the whole of one level.

An alternative approach was put forward by delegates and developed during the workshop. This was an intensive two days of work for delegates, the steering group and the facilitators on two of the hottest days of the year. A conceptual diagram was drawn up to illustrate that the different elements of the framework were overlapping, with a menu system, which organisations might choose from to gain "credits" within the standard's framework. The resulting interlocking framework, at present with the working title "Building a Learning Environment" attempts to describe the way in which Resource would like museums, archives and libraries to deliver learning, the type of evidence that would suggest they are doing this effectively, and gives some good practice examples. This will provide a basis for assessing both the *quality of learning services* and the *learning outcomes* for users and communities.

Appendix 1 gives the diagram, but the contents of the interlocking circles are:

- Identifying the external context for the organisation's work, by aligning its mission, polices and strategies to reflect learning agendas

- Extending its relationship with users, by:

- Identifying needs & opportunities

- Maximising access

- Involving users

- Reaching out to new users

- Creating welcoming spaces that inspire and support learning

- Working creatively with partners to provide learning opportunities.

Many issues arose from the workshop, which will be taken into account in continuing to develop the framework:

- It should help to encourage progress and development. It needs to be a pragmatic tool rather than a set of hard performance indicators that measure quantity instead of helping to improve quality.

- It eventually needs to be both *achievable* and *aspirational* for both small and large organisations, and for museums, libraries and archives.

- It needs to be organic and flexible, changing and evolving to reflect the external context and new initiatives

- It should acknowledge that providing a high quality learning experience depends as much on resources (highly qualified staff, money etc.) as on the values, attitudes and behaviours that reflect the organisation's culture and its commitment to learning.

- It embraces the principle that learning organisations provide effective learning opportunities i.e.: if processes and provision are continuously reviewed and improved in consultation with partners and users, this will result in an improved learning experience for all.

At the time of writing, Resource is developing the framework by presenting an overview of each element:

1. To list possible outcomes, together with examples of indicators that show what services do, separated from, but closely linked to, samples of evidence or outcomes which show the impact museums, libraries and archives have on users; and,

2. Then to give some selected examples of good practice.

Appendix 2 gives an example of what this might look like. This framework we are creating will continue to use and value processes and outputs, but is designed to encourage people to think about the end result and impact of their activities. It must be emphasised that this framework is in the very early stages of development and so the example must be taken for what it is – a first stab.

How will the standard operate?

One of the groups at the workshop was asked to look at implementation of the learning standard. As with other aspects, this is still at an early stage but there were some general pointers from which the steering group can begin to develop a structure. The main areas the group examined were:

- Was a system of accreditation or inspection a better method?

- Should the standard be fixed or be designed to develop organically?

- Should it be issued as a publication or be primarily web based?

- How could it meet the needs of both large and small organisations/services?

- Should it be voluntary?

In considering the structure the delegates had in mind four key purposes: to improve the services offered to users; to improve the organisations' own practices; to have a standard which could act as an advocacy tool; and which could act as a tool for levering resources. There was consensus that whatever indicators or evidence were required, this standard should in some way be linked to other standards, quality assurance schemes or performance measures so that evidence for those might be acceptable in this standard, and vice versa. This would help to prevent organisations having continually to measure and monitor slightly different things.

Delegates also felt that the standard could only be voluntary but that there should be strong incentives attached.

Conclusion

We are taking the new framework out to consultation around the country and in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in the autumn. The next steps in developing the standard are to work on the structure and the operating system and to pilot from April 2002. We hope next year to be in a position to tell the conference whether that has been achieved and how the process has developed. In the meantime, I hope this paper and the description of how Resource is approaching the standard, and our focus on outcomes, has been useful. Although the process may seem long and drawn out, we remain convinced that only a rigorous and detailed approach is likely to achieve the goal of measuring outcomes.

Resource would like to invite further contributions to the debate. We would welcome hearing how colleagues have been approaching the use of outcome-based evidence, and particularly invite contributions from colleagues in other countries. Please contact either Sue Wilkinson or Gina Lane from Resource. E-mails: sue.wilkinson@resource.gov.uk or gina.lane@resource.gov.uk.

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Appendix 1

Building a learning environment framework
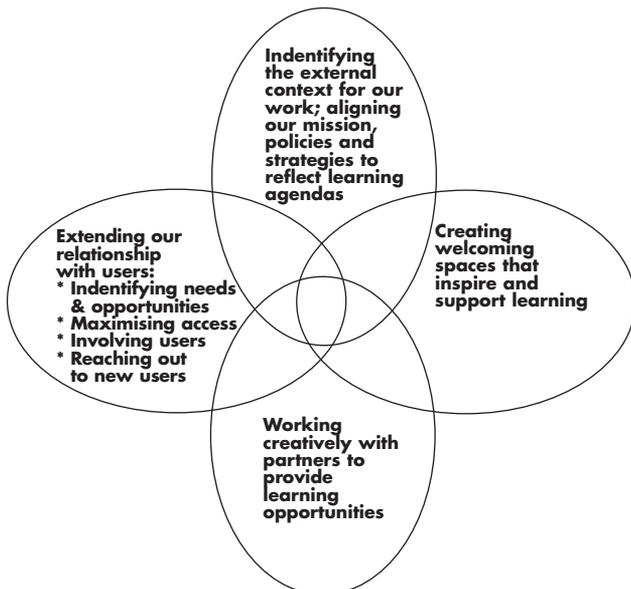
Appendix 2

Identifying the external context for our work; aligning our mission, policies and strategies to reflect learning agendas.

Overview

This area explores the extent to which the museum/library/archive is outward looking, and influences, responds to and changes to reflect the broad context within which it works. This involves:

- Demonstrating awareness of national government agendas,

- Analysing community needs

- Basing learning programmes on these needs.

It's also about demonstrating that learning is led from the top and embedded throughout the organisation, in its values, policies and strategies, and that staff and volunteers are equipped to deliver this strategy.

KEY OUTCOMES

OUTCOME 1

We support both national learning agendas and local priorities in our mission, plans, programmes and provision.

INDICATORS

- Our mission statement reflects learning agenda and incorporates broadest needs of the widest public

- Our plans are influenced by 360 degree consultation with stakeholders, users and staff

- Our committee/advisory groups are broadly representative of the learning interests of communities e.g., youth/schools, academic, minority ethnic groups, business, etc.

- Our forward plan, annual library plan etc prioritise learning objectives

- We have a learning and access policy exists and this is implemented

- Local social, political, and community factors shape and direct our learning needs analysis and resulting provision

- National agendas (e.g., Resource, DCMS, DfES, future trend surveys) are considered and integrated within our plans and policies as appropriate

- We are represented at senior level at local and national forums concerned with learning matters and are seen to influence these debates

EVIDENCE

- Users say they perceive the organisation as a place where they can learn and enjoy themselves

- The mission statement is publicly displayed so users and staff are familiar with this

- Staff have read the learning and access policy and can say how this affects the way they work

- Users, stakeholders and staff say they have been consulted and invited to contribute their ideas on learning and access

- Staff can identify specific local and national issues that have influenced the development of their policies and programmes on learning

- Tyne and Wear Museums Mission Statement:

To help people determine their place in the world, and understand their identities, so enhancing their self-respect and their respect for others.

We believe that:

We make a **positive difference to people's lives.**
We **inspire and challenge people** to explore their world and open up new horizons.
We are a **powerful educational and learning resource** for all the community, regardless of age, need or background.
We act as an **agent of social and economic regeneration.**
We are **fully accountable** to the people of the North East.

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