

ARTS-BASED METHODS

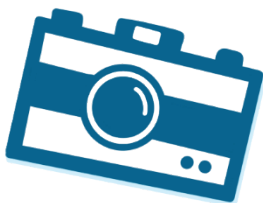
Creatively bringing forward experiences and data

What exactly are arts-based methods?

There are many different art forms that can be integrated into evaluation, including visual art, music, dance or movement, theater, and poetry. Arts-based methods are often conducted or integrated with traditional evaluation and research methods like surveys, interviews, and focus groups. Engaging in art during the evaluation process can make participants feel comfortable with sharing their experiences, elicit emotions or feelings to help provide context about an experience, or engage people in ways beyond the written word or numbers. Resulting art can serve as a deliverable to share the outcomes or findings in a way that goes beyond standard reports or infographics, or be paired with traditional reporting to increase impact.

Arts-based methods aim to center community voice, experience, and expertise, and often can do this better than traditional research tools. Integrating creative expression centers people and community in the research process; it is not just about the data and reporting. Arts-based methods make research and evaluation comfortable and accessible, enhancing the impact of the project and work, and, hopefully, having some fun along the way!

Here are some examples of arts-based methods:



Visual arts (still or moving)

- Story mapping
- Photovoice or photography
- Collage
- Portraiture
- Murals
- Graffiti
- Videos or animation



Visual arts (kinesthetic)

- Bead or token voting
- Insight boards
- Sculpture
- Quilting
- Mask making



Storytelling

- Comic books or zines
- River of Life or journey mapping
- Storybanking
- Oral histories
- Poetry



Performing arts

- Music
- Dance or movement
- Theater
- Body mapping

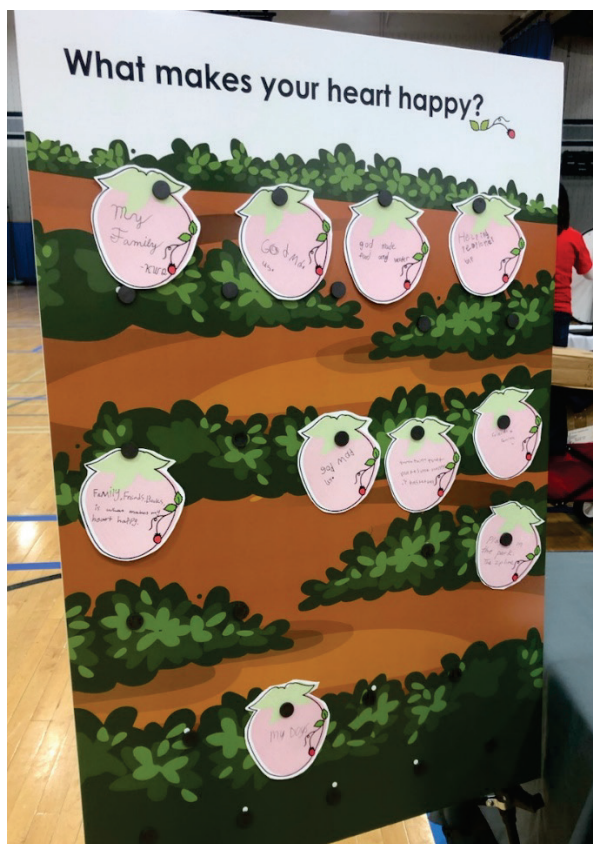
Why integrate art into evaluation and research?

Arts-based methods can make evaluation more meaningful and impactful.

Participants experience the evaluation differently and can express themselves in ways that are difficult to capture with traditional evaluation methods. Art can help authentically engage people and meet them where they are at. This can lead to powerful visuals and end products that more fully communicate experiences, insight, context, impact, and community wisdom. Art can bring life and meaning to numbers and reports. It magnifies the impact of the work and enables participants to see themselves reflected in the evaluation results.

Arts-based methods are rooted in community voice and cultural responsiveness.

Questioning the validity of arts-based methods?
See the Resources section for literature on the value and increased use of arts-based methods in research and evaluation.



Insight board asking children and youth about what is important to them. Participants can write or draw their answers on strawberries growing in a field. Powwow in Anoka-Hennepin in 2023. Materials were designed by Maureen McGovern of Wilder Research, with input from American Indian grantee partners and state staff.

Different cultures and communities share stories and experiences in a variety of forms beyond the written word—through song, poetry, visual arts, theater, and more. Some evaluation methods (like interviews or focus groups) already focus on hearing and learning about an experience and soliciting feedback about it. Integrating a group's cultural art forms of sensemaking and sharing of an experience with these traditional data collection approaches can help engage and bring forward that sharing.

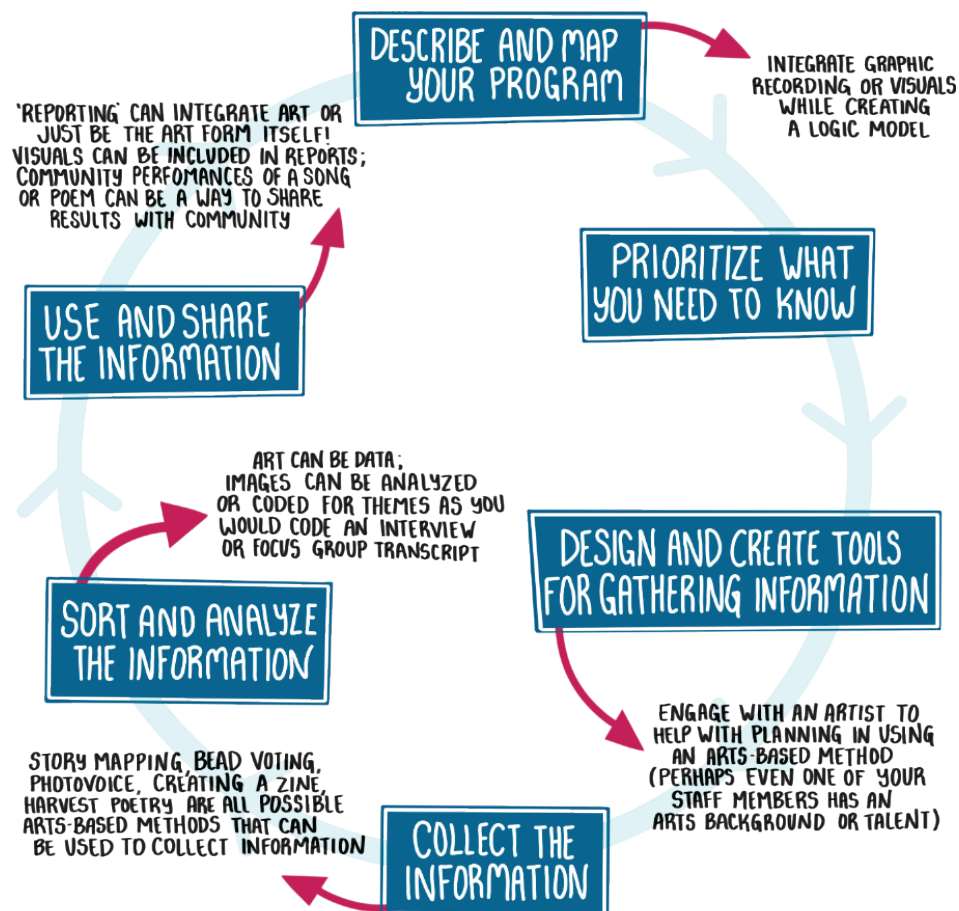
Creating art through research and evaluation can be an opportunity for healing and a way to build community and deepen understanding of the experience. Data collection approaches that are reflective of community art forms and culture can feel familiar and less extractive. Additionally, for communities that have been over-researched and historically have not benefited from study results, data shown through art can serve as a way for the community to validate and provide feedback on findings. This gives research participants greater ownership of their data.

Arts-based methods can engage communities that are typically left out of the research process.

The fields of evaluation and research, which traditionally place value on the written word and numerical data, overlook the many ways that knowledge is produced and shared, and requires participants to have a certain level of literacy in order to engage. As a result, the people who are impacted by the programs, policies, and systems can be left out of the feedback process because traditional methods do not effectively engage them (e.g., children or youth, older adults, non-English speaking communities, people who are neurodivergent). Using various art forms, such as visual art, performance art, or storytelling, allows for inclusion of different communication and engagement styles (e.g., auditory, kinesthetic, visual learners). This creates a welcoming space for different communities to show up fully as themselves and share. Creating art can also be fun, transforming a typical focus group into a creative and engaging experience.

When can arts-based methods be used in evaluation?

Art can be part of the evaluation process at any point! Arts-based methods can be done alongside traditional methods—it is not an “either/or” between arts-based methods and traditional methods. Arts and creative expression in research are additive and can enhance what is learned through the research process. Typically, we think more about art, such as visuals, as part of reporting or dissemination, but art forms can be used at any point. Here are some examples of arts-based methods that can be integrated throughout the evaluation cycle.



Considerations when engaging in arts-based methods

- **Learn about the audience and community background.** Consider the social and political contexts or environment that surrounds communities you want to engage in evaluation. This will help ensure that data collection activities are appropriate and considerate. Consider art forms that are part of that community and, thus, more likely to resonate.
- **Create a space that is welcoming and safe for participants to share and create art.** Host evaluation activities in community venues that are familiar and accessible. Consider partnering with an organization already connected with communities you want to hear from. Make translation services, sign language interpretation, or closed captioning (for virtual data collection) available as needed. Art makes us reflect more deeply about our experiences, so activities such as drawing, music, or poetry can bring up many different emotions for participants. Being in a space that feels comfortable can help participants feel safe to share and process their experience.
- **Have a clear consent process that includes how art and information will be shared.** Clarify who owns the art created and how it will be used: If a physical visual is created, who gets to keep it? When and how can it be used? How to honor authorship and maintain confidentiality will be critical if the topics are sensitive. Ownership and usage of the visual should be agreed upon and communicated with the evaluator/researcher, funder, program, and participants.
- **Creating art can be intimidating.** Ensure there are tools and support for participants to engage in art creation (if they are the ones doing the creating). For instance, if collaging with older adults, have easy-open scissors or an assistant to help those with mobility challenges. Be encouraging and supportive if participants feel frustrated or pressure to be perfect. Bring a sense of humor and joy to the creative process. The length of time needed to create art may take more time than expected or may require multiple sessions so participants do not feel rushed.
- **Develop an appropriate budget.** Like more traditional assessment methods, arts-based methods have their own associated costs. These will vary depending on the method, but typically include the cost of materials, the cost of hiring an artist to facilitate art creation (if you opt to work with an artist—though there are many methods that can be used without), and standard costs for implementing data collection with community (incentives, food for in-person activities, participant travel reimbursement, etc.).

Arts-based methods are fun and engaging and can be integrated with more traditional evaluation activities like surveys, interviews, and focus groups. For instance, instead of having community members sit alone while filling out a survey, they can write their ideas or recommendations on colorful sticky notes, pin them on a board, and read other responses. Bringing an artist to a focus group to illustrate experiences or community wishes adds a visual element to the data being shared and can inspire more rich or compelling conversation. Or you can bring large sheets of paper and markers to a focus group for participants to create an image of their experience or recommendation.

Resources

Art for Social Change. (n.d.). *Arts-based evaluation methods*.

<http://www.ascevaluation.ca/course.aspx?type=step4abe#ArtsBasedBasic>

Boydell, K. M., Gladstone, B. M., Volpe, T., Allemang, B., & Stasiulis, E. (2012). The production and dissemination of knowledge: A scoping review of arts-based health research. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 13(1). <https://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1711/3329>

Charlton, M. (n.d.). *Art-based evaluation 101*. Art Reach Toronto.

http://www.ascevaluation.ca/Documents/Toolkits/GOAL_ArtBasedEvaluation.pdf

Coemans, S., & Hannes, K. (2017). Researchers under the spell of the arts: Two decades of using arts-based methods in community-based inquiry with vulnerable populations. *Educational Research Review*, 22, 34-49.

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1747938X17300301?via%3Dihub>



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