

Reflections on 'Then & Now': Arts and cultural management and the shortcomings of student-led research projects

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Editorial review: This article has been subject to an editorial review process



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Abstract

This article provides a student reflection on the management process of a student-led research project entitled Then & Now: Arts at Warwick. The project sought to document the history of the Arts Faculty at Warwick University and communicate it to the wider community. It was an interdisciplinary and collaborative co-creation project that brought together undergraduate and postgraduate students from across the Arts Faculty. Setting and aiming the goals of the project activities, managing teamwork and research processes, and planning and implementing the public engagement strategy in the unprecedented times of the Coronavirus pandemic were challenging and rewarding experiences. The article, framed by scholarly perspectives, summarises the key aspects of the project management process by discussing and analysing the role of an arts and cultural manager. The Then & Now project provided an opportunity to reflect on the significance of the profession while developing and learning new online-based project management practices.

Keywords: arts management; cultural management; project management; student co-creation

Introduction

In early 2020, undergraduate and postgraduate students of the University of Warwick's Arts Faculty were invited to join a student-led research project initially entitled 'History of Arts at Warwick', later renamed 'Then & Now: Arts at Warwick'. The project sought to recruit students on a voluntary basis to act as exhibition researchers and social media engagement officers. These opportunities were presented as a chance to develop project management, research, and interview-based research skills, as well as team working, event management, marketing, public engagement, digital and social media, and communication skills.

Looking back at this invitation, I think of it as an ideal position for a student of arts and cultural management. Most likely, they would already have some of these skills but the project was a great opportunity to improve and gain new ones while engaging in a co-creation process. When I received the invitation, I took it as an opportunity to put my knowledge and previous experience into practice in the current learning community, but not necessarily as an opportunity for myself as a professional arts and cultural manager, despite actively working in the field since 2015. Reflecting on this experience has suggested the need for an analysis of the characteristics of cultural managers, their background, representations and their functions. Indeed, who are cultural managers? What is their role and functions? What makes someone an arts and cultural manager? What is their social status in terms of position in the cultural field? Is it recognisable as a profession or is it still *terra incognita*?

With these thoughts in mind, this article explores the role of an arts and cultural manager through the lens of *Then & Now*, discusses the role of leadership, and draws on personal experience from the project. It outlines the importance of an arts and cultural manager as a figure engaged in a project management process and mediation between human resources, production and expected creative deliverables. Finally, this article addresses the need for wider recognition of already existing and emerging cultural intermediaries.

The Nature of Arts and Cultural Management

Since the times when our ancestors were sharing stories by the fire, creating cave paintings illustrating their ideas or histories it is easy to imagine there were 'managers' promoting these events, appreciating, and taking care of these creative products. Nevertheless, the emergence of professional arts management dates back only to the 1960s which is related to the growth of public arts institutions, changes in their operational models, and the rising number of non-profit arts organisations seeking public funding (Palmer 1998: 443). However, at that time there

was no clear distinction between an art director, arts manager, and administrator as a discipline of arts management was not part of higher education. Only in the 1980s were arts management postgraduate courses established in a number of countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia (**Ibid, 437**). In the last three decades, from a small base, the field has slowly developed into a recognisable discipline around the world and has expanded. The main reason for that is the growth of the arts world into the cultural and creative industries (CCI), where art organisations are operating like any other private sector businesses.

Together with the growing importance of the CCI and their significant contribution to social and economic wellbeing worldwide, arts and cultural management is recognised as ‘a field where creative people are engaged’ It is not a narrow direction of the management’s discipline but ‘a comprehensive sphere’ (**Tavkheldze 2017: 388**). In various scholarly discussions (**Chong 2009; Byrnes 2015**), it is emphasised that this is because the arts have become more like businesses. Reorientation towards profit generation has brought various changes and challenges in the operational models of arts organisations. It led to the expansion of the circle of stakeholders, challenges in keeping the ideological approach, and incorporation of the new elements of management: strategic planning and leadership. More importantly, the art world, art organisations, and creative people usually possess a specific way of working that requires a corresponding and specific management approach.

As Ian Palmer (**1998: 436**) puts it: ‘managing creative people requires a sensitivity’, not to interfere with and disturb their creative freedom by overloading them with various management objectives. Scholar Peter Bendixen (**2000: 5**) emphasises: ‘one would not be able to manage an artist, an arts project or an arts organisation without some knowledge of and at least some feeling for the subject’. To fully understand arts and cultural management, we need first to understand *arts* and *culture*.

In many languages *culture* is one of the most complicated words (**Williams 2014**) and all uses of it, all variants of it, can be attacked and defended (**Gray 2015**). On the one hand, it incorporates artistic expression, practices or products, and on the other hand, *culture* is seen through a more sociological and anthropological lens, ‘as a way of life’ (**Bell and Oakley 2014: 17**). *Arts* are understood as imitation and representation of nature and reality through the artist (**Davies 2005**). The *Arts* are a form of communication, transmitting and inspiring emotions, feelings, and thoughts, but at the same time, through a functionalist lens, they serve a particular purpose, like providing an aesthetic experience (**Ibid**). Hence, *arts* exist within *culture* and both terms exist within society. Therefore, I

prefer an occupational title with a broader meaning – arts and cultural manager – rather than an arts manager. However, the latter is widely used in scholarly research. For these reasons, in this article, the terms arts manager, cultural manager, and arts and cultural manager (management) are used interchangeably.

Undoubtedly, in a creative environment within which cultural managers are working a primary role is played by artists and creatives. They have the skills to create new connections, compositions and communicate through various art forms, e.g., music, theatre, painting, sculpture, poetry, etc. 'It is [also] clear that art is based on human senses and these senses need to be managed' (Tavkhelidze 2017: 388). The competition between emerging artists, between many art organisations in the CCI field is constantly growing. In order to keep the creative process and its outputs relevant and accessible, fulfilling the primary purpose of the creative business, the role of arts and cultural management is becoming more important. Even though knowing and understanding the field is one of the main elements for an arts manager to succeed, the overall management needs are similar to basic management skills in other industries.

According to William J. Byrnes, managing in the arts include these four functions of management:

- *Planning is deciding what is to be done.*
- *Organising is deciding how it is to be done and who is to do it.*
- *Leading is deciding how other people are to get it done.*
- *Controlling is deciding if it is or is not getting done, and what to do if it is not.* (Byrnes, 2015: 23-24)

These four functions are the basis of arts and cultural management and are applied in all operational areas. To be an effective arts and cultural manager one needs these skills. However, the current competitive environment also requires possessing multidisciplinary abilities. These include, for example, marketing, public relations (PR), audience development, human resource (HR) management, financial management, fundraising, public policy, knowledge of legal issues in the arts and culture, information management, and research methods (Tavkhelidze 2017). One should not forget that constantly changing economic, political and legal, socio-cultural, and technological environments also require cultural managers to be flexible and adaptable.

As it is clear from the discussion, arts managers are constantly balancing between 'the traditional understanding of management as a process of directing and optimising conditions in order to reach a given objective' (Bendixen 2000: 4) and shaping cultural activities, creating social scenes, and experiences. The role of a cultural manager is to 'prepare the ground

for day-to-day operations as well as long-term strategy' (**Ibid, 8**). From my experience, an arts and cultural manager is a versatile person, a mediator, who has skills and knowledge of a broad range of issues and topics. They are professionals who may raise funds for a performance, initiate and implement cultural policies, or manage an artist or a troupe, and overall, play an important role in the socio-economic organisation of the CCI sector.

In this context, it is useful to examine the practice of project management in which arts managers engage and where a broad range of skills and knowledge is needed. The next section will investigate the theoretical framework of this practice that I deployed when engaging in the *Then & Now* project.

Project Management in the Field of Arts and Culture

The discipline of arts and cultural management allows one to develop the knowledge, skills and abilities needed to become a professional within the arts and culture, and work in policy making, various arts companies, museums, galleries, and many other related areas. As previously mentioned, it combines the tools of business with the tools of audience and community development to mediate between the arts, creatives, and audiences. During their career cultural managers may be responsible for a specific portfolio such as government relations, production, audience development, marketing, or hold the title of Executive Director. However, the fundamental practice they all engage with is project management.

In management, 'a project is defined as a one-time, usually a new task, that pursues a clearly defined goal; it differs from daily, routine tasks as it has a clearly defined beginning and end, and is carried out using limited time, financial, human, and technological resources' (**Lubyté 2008: 87**). In its essence, the project management process includes the same management functions as mentioned earlier and requires organisation, good communication, creative problem solving, adaptability, and empathy skills as well as being a leader in a teamwork process. It is a tool that involves budgets, schedules, timetables, problem-solving, task lists, and group leadership techniques (**Byrnes 2015: 473**).

Therefore, the emphasis in project management is on establishing clear performance objectives and targets, and to schedule an action plan of implementation in the given timeframe. For this reason, it is recommended, that 'any project should follow the guidelines of project management using the *Logical Framework Approach*' (**Walcott 2004**). Every manager has their own most convenient version of it, but the basic logic of any project is a clear goal or overall objective, specific objectives, activities, and expected results. Each must have clear indicators, sources

of verification, and risks/assumptions. One of the ways to check whether the *Logical Framework* of a particular project makes sense is to look at the activities and follow this logic: IF these activities are undertaken AND the risks/assumptions are true THEN the expected results will be reached. The same goes for the expected results: IF the expected result is achieved AND the risks/assumptions are true THEN the overall objective (the goal) will be achieved. It definitely sounds more complicated than it is in practice.

Using this technique enables a manager to set a common understanding among the team and stakeholders of what the project entails with agreed and focused objectives, and gives a systematic framework for monitoring and evaluation. Also, it enables planned activities and outputs that are collectively necessary and sufficient to achieve the specific and overall objectives (Sansom 2011). Below is an example of the *Logical Framework* that I am using in project management work.

Logical Framework Approach (logframe)

	Intervention logic	Success Measures	Source and means of verification	Assumptions / Risks		
Overall objectives	WHY? What are the overall broader objectives to which the action will contribute?	What are the key indicators related to the overall objectives?	What are the sources of information for these indicators?			
	<i>To improve... / To contribute...</i>					
Specific Objectives / Purposes	WHY? What specific objective is the action intended to achieve to contribute to the overall objectives?	Which indicators clearly show that the objective of the action has been achieved?	What are the sources of information that exist or can be collected? What are the methods required to get this information?	Which factors and conditions outside the Beneficiary's responsibility are necessary to achieve that objective? (external conditions) Which risks should be taken into consideration?		
	1					
	2					
	3					
Expected results / Outcomes	WHAT? The results are the outputs envisaged to achieve the specific objective. What are the expected results?	What are the indicators to measure whether and to what extent the action achieves the expected results?	What are the sources of information for these indicators?	What external conditions must be met to obtain the expected results on schedule?		
	1.1.					
	1.2.					
	2.1.					
	2.2.					
...						
Activities	What are the key activities to be carried out and in what sequence in order to produce the expected results? (group the activities by result)	Means:(inputs) What are the means required to implement these activities, e. g. personnel, equipment, training, studies, supplies, operational, facilities, etc.	What are the sources of information about action progress? Costs: what are the action costs? How are they classified?	What pre-conditions are required before the action starts? What conditions outside the Beneficiary's direct control have to be met for the implementation of the planned activities?	Responsible partner / person	When?
	1.1.1.					
	1.1.2.					
	1.2.1.					
	1.2.2.					
	2.1.1.					
	2.2.1.					
...						

Figure 1: Logical framework example. Source: author's own work

Once the Logical Framework is ready, the next planning stage is to work on deciding what is to be done and what resources are needed. For that, managers use one of the most popular techniques: the *Gantt Chart*. It helps 'visualise workflow in such a way that it allow[s] managers to better

integrate the timing of human and material resources needed to complete a project in a timely manner' (Byrnes 2015: 79). According to Donnelly (2019), the greatest advantages of *Gantt Charts* are: visually represented projects; easier communication amongst the team; realistic schedules; and clearly organised thoughts in one place. Although a Gantt Chart can be overly complex and overloaded, especially in arts and cultural management, it is a powerful and very useful tool no matter how big the project or the team is.

Regarding the team and its work, it is important that the manager is familiar with the main principles of the teamwork process, individual roles in the team, and leadership. It is necessary to understand that project management is always about teamwork. For a project team to be successful, the roles of the team members in management theory need to be considered. A widely recognised team role theory was suggested by Meredith Belbin in 1981. Based on the theory, there are nine main roles: *plants; resource investigators; monitor evaluators; co-ordinators; shapers; implementers; team workers; completer-finishers; specialists* (Mackechnie 2015). *Plants* offer creative ideas; *monitor evaluators* analyse solutions and anticipate team structure; *implementers* anticipate and implement a course of action; *co-ordinators* control the execution of an idea; *team workers* unite. According to arts management scholar Elona Lubyte, strong teams usually have an experienced *co-ordinator*, a *plant*, a *resource investigator*, and a few members of other roles. The most effective team consists of 4-6 people (Lubyte 2008: 93).

The theories and techniques mentioned above are just a few out of many that exist, but this is the base that I am, as an arts and cultural manager, following and using in my work. In my experience, an arts manager's job always includes strategic planning, organisation, leading, monitoring, budgeting, HR management, audience development, and public relations or marketing. Participating in the *Then & Now* project was a very different experience for me and it gave me an opportunity to analyse the theories and reflect on the project management process from a different perspective.

***Then & Now* Project Management Experience**

This section covers my observations and reflection on the management process of the overall project and reflects on the digital team practices. As mentioned in the short bio about the participants of *Then & Now* (2020), I initially joined the project as an opportunity to work in an interdisciplinary team of students by offering my own skills and knowledge in public communication, and event and project management. I joined as a student, as a social media engagement officer, but not with the idea to contribute as an arts and cultural manager. On the one hand, this reflected my

insecurity and uncertainty about my profession. On the other hand, I wanted the opportunity to observe the overall management process of a student-led project by contributing only by leading the digital team. I had no intention of assisting in managing the overall project. However, in order to manage a sub-team of the project, I had to be aware of the overall processes and activities, which also led me to take on more responsibilities than I initially intended.

Then & Now was a student-led project based on a student co-creation method. In my opinion, this overall concept was very beneficial in empowering the participants to work together as a team and to use their expertise to achieve a common goal. However, as much as I found it beneficial, I also found it to be missing a structured and logical project management approach. It might be that, because it was an experimental project, some of the key elements got mixed or lost in the process. Yet, in that case, it suggests that the project lead team was not sure about the *logical framework* in the first place. For me as a participant, the goal, specific objectives, expected results, and action plan of the project were not clear. Did the project lead team have an agreement and clear knowledge on what were their goals, expected results, potential risks and how to facilitate that process? Or was it a naïve expectation that the students, without receiving overall management guidelines, would directly take responsibility and plan and outline expected outputs? Also, it was not clear if we, the students, should come up with another logical framework for our aim to promote a greater sense of learning community amongst the Arts Faculty by creating an exhibition. Perhaps it was just me raising these questions and feeling the need for a more facilitated and managed creative process, but confusion was present among the rest of the team too.

Based on our interests we organised ourselves into three smaller groups. I naturally took the role of a *co-ordinator* of the Digital team. I did not rush to the managerial part of planning, as at first, I found it important to get to know why each of us joined *Then & Now* and the Digital team, what our abilities and skills were, and what our expectations were. It was important to create a safe space for teamwork. Afterwards, I initiated an improvised brainstorming session that helped to set a clearer idea of our objectives and activities. I did not focus on creating *a logical framework*. As it was mentioned, the project did not have the *logical framework* and creating it just for a sub-team would have caused more chaos. Secondly, it might have been an overload of various management tools for the team, whose members are not well familiar with it. Instead, we focused on planning and organising: deciding what was to be done, how it was to be done, and who was to do it.

Digital team members agreed on their individual responsibilities based on their interests and expertise. It included managing teamwork and planning digital communication and marketing, social media management and content planning, graphic design, and organising the physical exhibition launch event. However, as the project was volunteer based, it meant that students were joining and/or leaving the project when it was convenient for them. In order to achieve the planned outputs, it was very important to keep all team members engaged by balancing their capabilities, personal expectations, and the tasks in hand. Using a *Gantt Chart* helped us to visualise our workflow in regards timing the needed resources to complete our objectives.

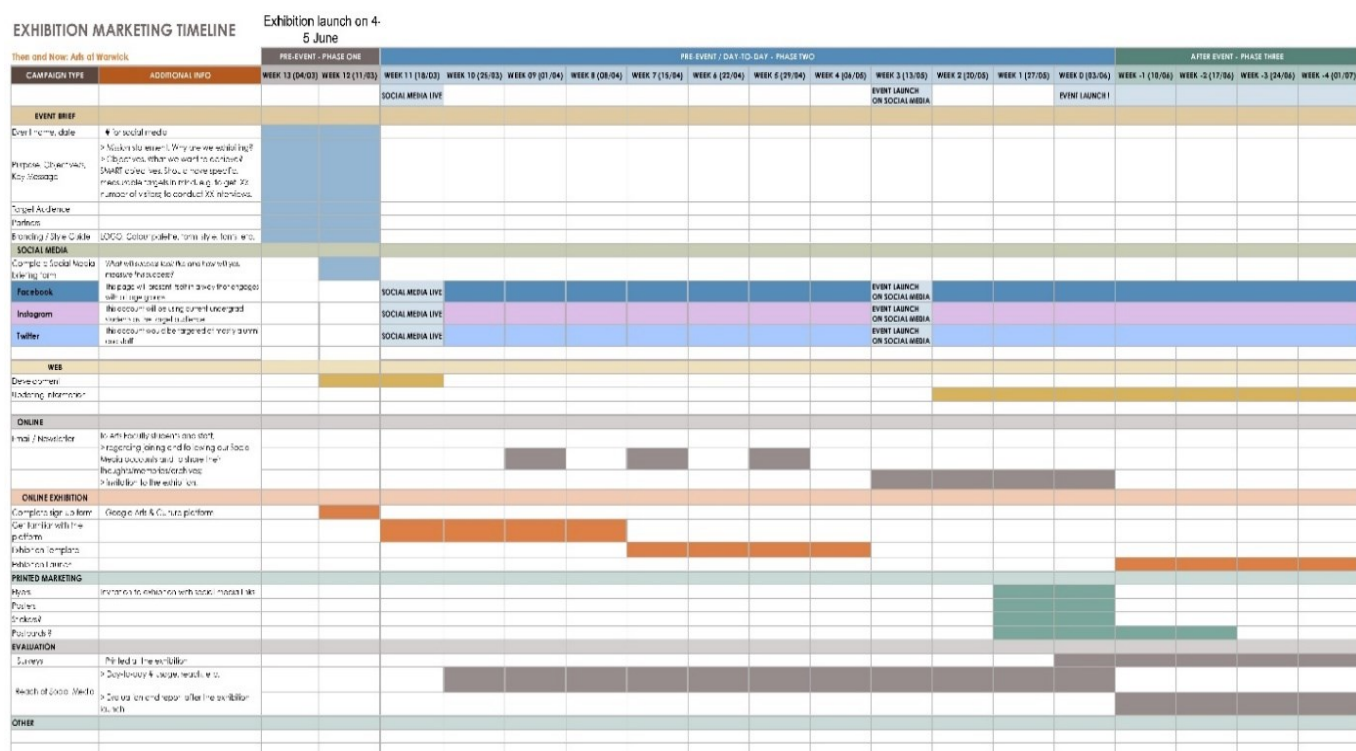


Figure 2: Initial Gantt Chart of marketing and public engagement. Source: author's own work

Notably, the digital team was not creating new content per se. Our role was that of cultural managers, mediating between the content creators (Research team) and the public via digital communication, e.g. social media. Thus, one of the biggest challenges we faced was other teams being less organised and/or lacking consistent leading and monitoring, which caused disruptions in our teamwork. As a result, it was highly necessary for the project leads to take the role of leading the whole project by setting a structure and a timetable for an online exhibition.

Moreover, working with researchers, or the students who feel more comfortable working individually, is very similar to working with an artist. According to Bendixen (2000), when during a period of creativity, the artist more or less isolates themselves from the outside world, they create and

use their own specific artistic 'language'. It helps to keep their inner world of imagination and inspiration, but it is not necessarily the language of the public. It requires an interpretation. The arts manager may not be a professional arts interpreter but definitely has the skills and abilities to manage that 'language gap' between the artist and the public. This is the task I and the other arts manager, Alejandra, took on when we were overseeing the development of the online exhibition. We planned and formulated very concrete tasks for the researchers on how they were expected to present their findings so that we could interpret it and present it to the public an engaging way.

Overall, I feel it is hard to say if *Then & Now* was a success or a failure because it is not clear how and on what basis this might be measured. My golden rule is *if you cannot measure it, you cannot manage it*. The Digital team had clear indicators of success regarding its activities, but was it the same in the overall project? It is true that the overall objective of creating an online exhibition was achieved, but at what costs? Was the management of the project effective and successful? I would doubt it, but it is just my opinion as an arts and cultural manager, who is constantly involved in the creative project management process.

Conclusion

Exploring the characteristics of arts and cultural managers, their background, representations, and their functions, both in a theoretical framework and within the *Then & Now* project has given me a greater appreciation on how important the occupation is in the facilitation of a creative process. As much as it is wanted and expected from the public to understand the artistic language and to appreciate the arts, a cultural manager is a key mediator. In today's world, they are experts knowing the wants and the needs of the public, understanding the cultural field, and are masters at audience development and public engagement.

Given the multidisciplinary nature of arts management, there is a danger of becoming a jack of all trades and master of none. However, a successful manager emphasises creating clear goals and objectives, achieving results, and identifying techniques to measure it. Therefore, *Then & Now* is a great example of a project having a very strong ideological approach but missing the logical framework and the strong leadership – the basis of the creative project management. Leadership is not the same as creating a hierarchy in a team. By experimenting with and choosing the most appropriate leadership model, I strongly believe this project could have achieved even more ambitious results. Nevertheless, leadership is just one part of the whole management process. Ultimately, successful management is about continued planning, organising, leading, and controlling.

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Figure 1: Logical framework example. Source: author's own work

Figure 2: Initial Gantt chart of marketing and public engagement. Source: author's own work.

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To cite this article:

Ruikytė, E., 2021. Reflections on 'Then & Now': Arts and cultural management and the shortcomings of student-led research projects. *Exchanges: The Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, 8(4), 87-98. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.31273/eirj.v8i4.804>.