

Measuring the immeasurable: capturing intangible values

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Abstract

When we refer to 'intangible' experiences, we are describing encounters, events or occurrences which do not have a physical presence, which we cannot touch and see and which cannot be perceived by the senses.

Intangible experiences encompass some of the most important dimensions of life- love and longing, inspiration and joy, excitement and pleasure. Their presence is acknowledged by each of us in our everyday lives and is part of our essential humanity. But the incorporeal nature of intangible experiences presents special challenges. This paper examines some of the issues which are driving discussions about intangible values amongst professionals in Western museums. It uses a case study to explore capturing intangible values before exploring the complex question of measuring them.

Introduction

Capturing and measuring intangibles is a subject of considerable discussion across a diverse range of sectors including community development, business, government and museums.

This quote, from an occasional series published by the Canadian International Development Agency, is revealing. It discusses the role of intangibles as integral to realising 'community capacity' arguing that society's capacity to meet the needs of its members is dependent upon both the resources available to it and on how well those resources are utilized. The capacity to use tangible resources is dependent on intangible capabilities.

Then come a wide range of less tangible, but no less important, dimensions of capacity having to do with skills, experience and creativity; social cohesion and social capital; values and motivations; habits and traditions; institutional culture, etc. These intangible dimensions of capacity, often referred to as "capabilities," are crucial because they determine how well society uses the other resources at its disposal...

Core capabilities (intangibles) refer to the creativity, resourcefulness and capacity to learn and adapt of individuals and social entities. They are what allows them to realize their human and social potential to the highest possible level (Lavergne and Saxby 2001, 2-3)

Intangibles are important, therefore, because they *enable* us to do so much else. Intangible capabilities allow us to realise our human and social potential to the highest possible level.

If, as the result of a museum visit, a person experiences the joy of discovery his/her capacity to learn is likely to be enhanced. If as the result of a museum visit, people have greater awareness and understanding of difference, that understanding may contribute to tolerance for diversity and increased social cohesion. The question of *capturing* intangibles is part of a wider conversation about the *role* of intangibles in many spheres of our lives.

In the business sector as well, intangible assets are now recognised as drivers of economic value creation. They are variously associated with the leadership, human and intellectual capital, workplace culture, innovation, adaptability, brand equity, reputation and the quality of alliances and networks that make an organisation or business successful or otherwise (Youngman 2003; Carayannis 2004; Jarboe 2007).

Governments have also recognised that intangibles have a role to play in the health of individuals and communities. National indicator projects focusing on individual and community *well-being* emerged in the 1990's in response to a global reaction against quality of life being measured solely by economic growth, fiscal wealth and GDP.

The role of cultural vitality in sustaining communities and the recognition that culture is relevant to building social capital and social cohesion has supported the inclusion of cultural indicators within wider social indicators frameworks. Policy development increasingly focuses on the intersection of cultural participation and other social areas including community building and individual well-being (Jensen 2002; AEGIS 2004). Central to these policies is

belief in the beneficial outcomes of participation to build trust and the norms of reciprocity that are fundamental to social capital and social cohesion.

Regular involvement in these [cultural] activities can produce social solidarity and social cohesion through the creation of community symbols and community identity (McCarthy et al 2004, 29).

Participation in cultural activities is also assumed to have positive impacts on individuals through exposure to new experiences and through building the confidence and self- esteem that results in well-being and mental health (Matarasso, 1997; Guetzkow 2002; McCarthy et al, 2004; Ruiz, 2004).

Intangibles, we find, are emerging as central ingredients in business success, sustainable community development and social policies concerned with the well-being of communities and their citizens.

Museums and intangible experiences

The museum field has its own particular interest in intangibles and the role that they play in understanding the user experience, providing a holistic picture of value creation and supporting a coherent narrative for advocacy purposes. This section examines each of these factors starting with Public Value and its implications for a user-centred approach in public sector planning and service provision.

Public Value

Public Value is a theory and model for public sector management developed by Mark Moore, the Hauser Professor of Nonprofit Organizations at the Harvard Kennedy School and the author of *Creating Public Value: strategic management in government*.

Fundamental to Public Value Moore's is the underlying principle that it is the purpose of public sector management is to make '*...a positive difference in the individual and collective lives of citizens*' (Moore and Moore 2005, 17). To

achieve this, Moore believes that public institutions must focus on the use they make of the organisational assets at their disposal in the service of end-users- the public.

In the view of commentators of Moore's work (Kelly et al, 2002; Horner et al, 2006), the public are at the heart of Public Value because, in a democracy, only the public can negotiate and determine what is truly of value to them.

The public realm can only be public if people take part in shaping and forming it, and so it not only comprises but is also based on the values that people hold (Jones 2010, 33).

Adopting a Public Value approach, therefore, brings with it the requirement to acquire a better understanding of public preferences, emerging attitudes and expectations to ensure that the values of an organisation are in tune with those of the public. If the priorities and expectations of the public shift and the culture of a public body does not, then satisfaction and trust in the service may be undermined (Kelly et al 2002; Weil, 2002). These preferences, attitudes and expectations are often intangible.

A holistic model for measuring museum value

A second factor influencing interest in intangibles within the museum sector has been frustration with the precedence given to instrumental values by public authorities. Instrumental values are the contribution that museums make to economic and social policies determined by governments. In the last two decades, museum value has been assessed based on evidence of reducing social exclusion, contributing to the economy and adding to the development of social capital in communities. Intangible value (or what the museum field has described as *intrinsic* value) has entered the discourse as a counterpoint to a perceived imbalance and narrow perception of the total value that museums create.

Museums have argued that they create values beyond the instrumental agenda of governments and that these other values must be admitted and

measured. Within the literature and discourse on museum value, four dimensions have been identified and are outlined in Table 1 below:

Instrumental values	The application of museum purposes and functions to wider social issues; ‘aspirations to contribute to a wider agenda of social change’ (Davies 2008, 260). Contributions to government policies such as social cohesion, social inclusion, tourism, employment, economy in general.
Intangible or intrinsic or values	Values that are not concrete, tangible or physically discernible. What John Holden (2006, 14) refers to as ...‘ <i>the set of values that relate to the subjective experience of culture intellectually, emotionally and spiritually</i> ’.
Institutional values	The approach, attitude and processes that institutions adopt to engage with and create value for the public. <i>Through its concern for the public an institution can achieve such public goods as creating trust and mutual respect among citizens, enhancing the public realm, and providing a context for sociability and the enjoyment of shared experiences.</i> (Holden 2006, 17).
Use value	‘Use value’ can be demonstrated in willingness to give something up, to spend money, to commit energy and time to visiting, using, enjoying, travelling to and from museums and volunteering one’s time to the work of the museum. Use value can also encompass other forms of engagement such as using museum websites and attending outreach programmes. Value is evident even when people do not visit museums but still value them for the role that they play in conserving the communal archive, preserving it for generations to come and offering the option for future engagement. These forms of ‘non-use’ value are called existence, bequest and option value.

Advocacy

A third factor driving the museum sector’s interest in intangible value is found in the pressing need for advocacy in these difficult economic times due to almost unprecedented levels of cuts to museum funding in many Western democracies. For example:

- In addition to the 25% cuts already imposed on Netherlands museums, a further 13% of cuts are proposed which, if they occur, would mean cuts of up to 38%;
- 22% of English museums have experienced cuts of 25% or more since the election of the Coalition government in 2010 (Newman and Tourle, 2011); and
- US museums are experiencing challenges as the economic crisis exposes foundations and endowments to market forces, decreases public expenditure, makes sponsors more cautious and impacts household expenditure.

In response, the museum sector throughout the Western world is recognising that, in the absence of a convincing narrative about the value of museums with which to persuade governments that funding should be sustained, museums are vulnerable in hard economic times and can too easily be perceived as a luxury rather than an essential.

The value of museums was the subject of the most recent newsletter of the Network of European Museum Organisations (NEMO, 2011). NEMO argues that governments often have a partial view of museum value and it is the responsibility of the museum sector to raise awareness of the breadth and extent of value, including those intangible/ intrinsic values that are created by museums. Interviewed by NEMO, Vladimir Sucha, the Director for Culture and Media at the Directorate General for Education and Culture at the European Commission stated that

Recent policies tend to overemphasise the measurable economic impact of services or institutions for the public good using market data for that purpose. ...the awareness of public authorities must be raised to the fact that museums have value, encompassing but not confined to, utilitarian and instrumental outcomes (NEMO 1/2011, 5)

To summarise, identifying, capturing and measuring intangible value is being driven by a range of factors. Shifts in public policy to a more holistic idea of societal well-being, the growing interest in Public Value and its focus on the

experiences and preferences of the end-user, a general recognition that intangibles are fundamental to the achievement of economic objectives in business and social development within communities and the need to develop a narrative that convinces public authorities that museum matter in many different ways combine to support our quest for capturing and using intangible evidence.

Capturing intangible value

The term 'value' can be applied to both the overarching goals which guide individual behavior in the long term which promise positive end states and the beneficial positive attributes associated with things. Both uses of the term are used in this paper which begins this section with a discussion of intrinsic/intangible outcomes experienced by people, individual and collectively, as the result of museum experiences.

In the last decade, several authors have tried to describe intangible experiences as they occur in the arts and cultural heritage sector.

Commentators have variously described intangible/ intrinsic values experienced by individuals as a '*state of absorption*', or '*focused attention*' that comes with '*captivation*', (McCarthy et al 2004, 45), as the '*deep satisfaction*' that the '*pleasure*' of seeing an art work or having a cultural experience that is moving and meaningful, can engender (McCarthy et al 2004, 46), as the capacity to explore '*personal meaning*' (Silverman 1993; 1995), and the discovery of '*personal beliefs in amongst universal truths*' (DCMS 2005, 6), as the provision of a '*new perspective on the world*' (McCarthy et al 2004, 48) and the uplifting spiritual experiences that address our needs to experience '*the religious, the numinous and the sublime*' (Holden 2004, 34).

McCarthy et al (2004) also argue that these individual states can aggregate and accrue to the public realm, connecting people '*more deeply to the world*', extending their '*capacity for empathy*' through drawing them into

the experiences of people and cultures '*vastly different from their own*' (McCarthy et al 2004, 47).

Other intrinsic/ intangible outcomes are experienced collectively. Holden finds that symbolic value is generated through culture's '*expression of communal meanings*' (Holden 2004, 34). The '*creation of social bonds*' (McCarthy et al, 2004: 50) that '*make connections between people*', '*reinforce a sense of unity and identity*' (Holden 2004, 34) and provide a way for us all to see our place in the world (DCMS 2005, 3).

When we set out to capture evidence of these intangible states, we are seeking to understand and interpret social reality through discovering the meanings that people attach to things, relationships and events. The research paradigm which is most frequently applied is called *interpretivism* because it views human beings as creators, who can generate their own systems of meaning and make sense of their world. Interpretivist data gathering methods try to capture reality as it is experienced by the respondents, present information gathered verbally in descriptive form and use the respondents' own words to describe their views and experiences. To achieve these aims, qualitative methods are predominantly used to allow people freedom to express themselves in their own terms.

Scott (2008) used an interpretivist approach to explore the question of what people working in museums and the general public considered to be the value of museums and then distilled the data from both cohorts to create a typology of value as the basis to develop a set of corresponding measures.

The two cohorts included a public sample which included users and non-users of museums in rural and urban centres across four lifestyle groups- young adults between 18-24, parents with children under 12, culturally active adults between 35-55 and seniors as well as a professional cohort of people working in and with a variety of museums across the country. Both groups were questioned about what contribution (if any) that they thought museums make to individuals, communities and to the economy. And the public cohort

was also asked questions about the significance to them personally of having a museum in their community, of and what, if anything, would be lost if museums no longer existed.

A very rich field of qualitative data, much of which dealt with intangible outcomes, was categorised into intrinsic, instrumental, institutional and use value dimensions (Table 2).

Individuals experienced the value of museums across all dimensions. Of prime importance to the respondents in this study was the type of self-directed learning in a free choice environment that museums offer. Instrumental learning outcomes were associated with acquiring facts and skills. But the learning that was most valued was expressed in the affective language of the intrinsic dimension using words such as enrichment, discovery, enlightenment, inspiration, perspective, awareness, insight refreshment, affirmation, joy, pleasure and excitement.

The public respondents to this study also provided positive statements about the value of museums irrespective of direct use and were able to distinguish between their individual preferences and the importance of museums for the community as a whole. Non-users generated statements in support of the existence, bequest and option value of museums.

Personally it doesn't mean a lot as I don't visit them, but I can see the benefit of them being here. I would recommend them to visitors if asked (Public cohort: female, non-visitor, parent, regional resident)

Museums don't hold a great attraction to me so having them doesn't have great importance to me but this may change as my child grows older (Public cohort: female, visitor, parent, regional resident)

I don't think I would lose much sleep if museums ceased to exist; however, it would be sad for future generations not to have the opportunity to see our history other than in photos, books etc. (Public cohort: male, non-visitor, parent, urban resident)

In terms of communities, the study found that respondents identified the educational role of the museum as a resource for schools and communities as something which was highly valued. The contribution of museums to social cohesion was recognised through opportunities provided for social interaction and encouragement of audience diversity. The instrumental value of museums was also perceived in the contributions that museums make to the economy through employment, purchase of services, attracting tourists, positive input to urban regeneration schemes, contributing to civic branding and inspiring new product development through provision of access to the 'ideas' archives.

The institutional value of museums in this study is perceived across four aspects. The first is the development of citizenship through public access to collections and fostering democratic discussion and debate. The second is the provision of information which is perceived as honest, well balanced, meaningful and trustworthy. The third aspect is demonstrated through the capacity of museums to attract non-public funding from donors and sponsors and to be the preferred repository for bequests. The fourth aspect is the capacity of museums to attract local, national and international partnerships based on perceptions of the institution as dynamic, well-run and making a significant public contribution.

Finally, museums are attributed with a range of intrinsic values for communities. The public respondents expressed four ways in which museum generate intrinsic value for communities. The historical value of museums is experienced through their role in being a communal archive, a vehicle for cultural transmission, through providing opportunities to experience the past and learn the lessons of history and through all of this to engender a sense of belonging to a shared culture. Social value is experienced through museums' contribution to sense of place, community identity and the use of its civic spaces. Museums have symbolic value as sites for commemorative events and they provide spiritual value through generating experiences of wonder, awe and meaning.

Value dimensions⇒	Intrinsic	Instrumental	Institutional	Use
Individuals	<p>1) Cognitive a) Enrichment b) Discovery c) Enlightenment d) Inspiration e) Perspective 2) Well being a) Refreshment, b) Affirmation c) Joy d) Pleasure e) Excitement 3) Empathy a) Awareness b) Insight</p>	<p>1) Learning a) Skills b) Facts and knowledge</p>		<p>1) Direct and indirect use 2) Non use a) Existence b) Option c) Bequest</p>
Communities	<p>1) Historical Value a) Communal archive b) Experience of the past c) Lessons of history d) Belonging e) Cultural transmission 2) Social Value a) Sense of place b) Community identity c) Civic spaces 3) Economy a) Inspiration for new ideas and new products 3) Symbolic Value a) Commemoration 4) Spiritual Value a) Wonder and awe b) Meaning</p>	<p>1) Community capacity (a) An educational resource for schools (b) A learning resource for the community (c) Leisure facilities (d) Developing civic/ community pride 2) Social cohesion (a) Providing opportunities for engagement (b) Encouraging social interaction 3) Economy a) Direct i) Employment ii) Purchase of services iii) New products b) Indirect i) Contribution to cultural Tourism ii) Local multiplier effect iii) Contribution to regeneration iv) Attracting creative communities v) Contribution to civic branding</p>	<p>1) Citizenship a) Public access to collections 2) Interpretation of information a) Trusted expertise b) Balanced presentation 3) Capacity to attract non public investment a) sponsors b) donors c) bequests 4) Building partnerships a) local b) national c) international</p>	

Table 2: A Values Typology for Museums (Scott 2008)¹

¹ First published in Scott, C.A. 2008. Using Values to Position and Promote Museums. *International Journal of Arts Management*, Vol. 11, No. 1, Fall, 28-41.

This typology formed the basis for developing measures based on many of these value fields (Table 3)

Use value measures	Institutional value measures	Instrumental value measures
<p><i>Indicator: Direct use (physical visits)</i> Measure 1: Number of visitor attendances to museums annually</p> <p><i>Indicator: Indirect use (use of outreach services)</i> Measure 1: Number of users of outreach programs ie. number of participants to travelling exhibitions and outreach programs including lectures and workshops Measure 2: Number of unique visits to museum websites</p> <p><i>Indicator: Willingness to engage (through extended time commitment)</i> Measure 1: Number of volunteers Measure 2: Total number of volunteer hours per annum Measure 3: Number of members Measure 4: Number of unpaid hours contributed by Boards of Trustees, friends groups, etc. Measure 5: Number of visits per visitor per year</p> <p><i>Indicator: Non –use (value irrespective of direct visits or other forms of use and engagement)</i> Measure 1: Willingness to pay irrespective of direct engagement</p>	<p><i>Indicator: Recognition of trusted expertise</i> Measure 1: Number of public enquiries annually Measure 2: Number of external projects for which museum expertise has been requested.</p> <p><i>Indicator: Building relationships</i> Measure 1: Number of local, national and international partnerships involving museums and other government agencies Measure 2: Significance of these projects in terms of \$, number and type of major stakeholders</p> <p><i>Indicator: Attracting non-public investment</i> Measure 1: Number and value of sponsorships (cash and in kind)</p> <p><i>Indicator: Capacity to attract bequests and donations</i> Measure 1: Number and value of donations Measure 2: Number and value of bequests</p>	<p><i>Indicator: Providing educational resources</i> Measure 1: Number of school students visiting Measure 2: Number of partnerships with education bodies Measure 3: Number of adult education programs Measure 4: Number of participants in these programs</p> <p><i>Indicator: Knowledge building</i> Measure 1: Number of research publications based on collections Measure 2: Number and value of museum/university projects funded by Research Grants</p> <p><i>Indicator: Contribution to tourism</i> Measure 1: Number of domestic tourists annually Measure 2: Number of international tourists annually Measure 3: Number of museums that win tourism awards annually</p> <p><i>Indicator: Contribution to local economy</i> Measure 1: Number of Equivalent Full Time (EFT) employed staff Measure 2: Value of local services purchased (contractors, supplies, services)</p> <p><i>Indicator: Social inclusion</i> Measure 1: Number and percentage of visitors by ethnicity Measure 2: Number and percentage of visitors by socio-economic status</p>

Table 3: Measures of value (Scott, 2009)²

² First published in Scott, C. A. 2009, Exploring the evidence base for museum value. *Museum Management and Curatorship*. Vol. 24, No. 3, September, 195- 213.

Though measures can be developed for instrumental, institutional and use dimensions of value, intrinsic/ intangible values present a different challenge.

Measuring intangible/intrinsic values

It can be argued that any institution which creates experiences that result in such a positive array of outcomes (well-being, empathy, joy, belonging, identity, pride) can claim a measure of success. The success of museums is measured, however, not only by the institutions themselves but also by governments and by the public. To return to a point made at the beginning of this paper, intangibles are the capabilities that *enable* people to realise other capacities and it is this 'enabling' element, the contribution that intangibles make to socially desired outcomes enshrined in public policy which particularly interests public governments.

This creates something of a contradiction with regard to measurement. Although intangibles are increasingly recognised and admitted within government assessments of investment in public culture, they are measured through proxy indicators that have a tangible presence against which a numerical value can be attributed. This is the system increasingly used by governments seeking evidence to justify investment in arts and cultural heritage within a market-based view of economics.

An example is found in the New Zealand Ministry for Cultural Heritage's *Cultural Indicators for New Zealand* project. The stated aim of the project is to 'monitor trends in the contribution of cultural heritage to New Zealand society and economy' (MCH 2010, 1). 24 indicators are organised around 5 themes of *engagement, cultural identity, diversity, social cohesion and economic development*.

Neither social cohesion nor cultural identity can be seen or touched- they are intangible states. Within the *Cultural Indicators for New Zealand* project, social cohesion is measured by evidence of social interaction between groups. The measurement of social cohesion uses indicators which have a tangible presence and against which a numerical value can be placed: (a) the percentage of non-Māori attendance at Māori cultural events; and (b) other ethnicities attendance at their own and other groups' events. Similarly, measurement of cultural identity occurs through other tangible proxies to which one can attribute a numerical value:

- number of speakers of te reo Māori;
- percentage of local New Zealand content on television;
- ratings of Māori television programmes;
- the percentage of the population which rates culture as important to national identity; and
- the number and percentage of New Zealand cultural events with a specific New Zealand theme or content.

A different example comes from the UK's *Taking Part* survey (DCMS, 2010). This is a yearly nationwide survey of both adults and children which has been conducted since 2005. It is managed by the national government's Department of Culture, Media and Sport and was developed with the former Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA), Arts Council England (ACE), English Heritage and Sport England.

The survey seeks evidence of the impact of participation in arts, sport and cultural heritage on individual and community well-being. Specifically, it is seeking correlations between participation in sport, improved health and decreased health spending and correlations between participation in arts and cultural heritage activities, individual well-being and social capital in communities. There is a discernible economic agenda at work here. Increased social capital means reduced crime, less civil disobedience, citizen safety and the growth of norms of trust and reciprocity- this costs less than more police on the streets, cleaning up graffiti and dealing with anti-social behaviour. Increased individual well-being means less expenditure on health.

But, on the other hand, there are advantages for the cultural heritage sector in general and museums in particular. Though the economic valuation methods preferred by governments are quantitative and, therefore, seemingly incompatible with capturing the qualitative data resulting from intangible outcomes, the methodology which *Taking Part* is using (*selective preference techniques*) enables qualitative information to be admitted and recognised for the important role it plays in enabling other desired outcomes.

Subjective well-being (SWB) is defined as an individual's self-assessment of his/her their own wellbeing. It is elicited through numeric or qualitative scales by asking respondents to rate their wellbeing on scales of 1-10, 1-7, or by stating life satisfaction from 'not at all satisfied' to 'completely satisfied'. The results provide policy makers with a picture of the individual value of engagement, with specific reference to the improvement in subjective outcomes generated by participation in cultural activities, such as museums (DCMS 2010, 33). Subjective well-being is then cross referenced with the development of social capital in communities, specifically through the creation of networks of trust and reciprocity offered by the opportunities for socialisation that result from participation in cultural activities. Selective preference techniques may signal a way towards resolving the key issue of recognising intangibles that has been a source of conflict between government and cultural heritage sector (Bakhshi et al 2009).

There is nothing new about rating scales or agreeing/ disagreeing with motivational statements. What is important is the use of intangible/ intrinsic outcomes based on individual experience, including those experiences resulting from engagement with museums, captured in national survey that is being used to assess investment in cultural heritage and determine future public policy. This links the value that the public places on the museum experience with the Public Value that public authorities seek to create through investment and policy. And arts and cultural heritage are the conduits for that value creation.

Conclusion

Why is measuring intangibles important? Certainly, we can see from the examples that the public attributes feelings of individual well-being to museum experiences. At a community level, museums are associated with identity, sense of place, meaning and belonging- key dimensions related to social capital. Economically, museums are valued because of they hold the archive of ideas and can, thus, inspire 'new ideas'.

If museums are generating these important intangibles, then we are fostering the very capabilities that can enable the development of learning, creativity, well-being and social cohesion. With this knowledge, our narrative about the value of museums to individuals, the economy and community health is strengthened.

Governments, with their market- focused view of economics, need evidence of value in this form so that they can make comparisons between many worthy competitors for the public purse. In our accountability to governments, we may have to accept their economic valuation models for the foreseeable future and use then to create our own, powerful, narrative.

But as importantly, capturing and measuring intangible values has implications for the relationships involved in realising Public Value. Mark Moore sees Public Value creation as a conscious relationship between two actors, the public authority and the public organisation (the museum) deciding between them how to use their assets to serve the public in ways that create a positive benefit. However, only the public knows what is of benefit to them and much of their experience is intangible. Finding ways to capture that intangible value and use it in our programmes, marketing, branding, advocacy and accountability enables the voice of the public to be heard.

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