

BEYOND AUDIT CULTURE: A RHIZOMATIC APPROACH TO EVALUATING CULTURAL IMPACT

MA Anna Maria Ranczakowska

Tallinn University, Estonia

Abstract

The dominance of audit culture in cultural policy has led to evaluating socio-cultural centres primarily through quantifiable metrics, obscuring their relational and process-based forms of impact. This study critically examines conventional assessment frameworks and proposes Rhizomatic Impact Evaluation, an anthropologically informed, qualitative approach inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome. Drawing on ethnographic research with the European Network of Cultural Centres (ENCC), including interviews, surveys, and participatory workshops, I show how practitioners strategically navigate and resist imposed evaluation models by developing informal, alternative assessment practices. Findings illustrate how cultural impact emerges non-linearly through community narratives, adaptive collaborations, and social transformations, dimensions largely invisible in standard reporting. Rather than advocating for a singular paradigm shift, this article offers Rhizomatic Impact Evaluation as a methodological alternative, integrating relational, participatory, and context-sensitive methodologies that can coexist with conventional metrics and align evaluation more closely with the lived complexity of socio-cultural practices.

Keywords: *audit culture, cultural policy, socio-cultural centres, qualitative evaluation, ethnography, rhizomatic methods, impact assessment.*

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Introduction

Over the past decades, the industrialisation of culture under neoliberal governance has led to the proliferation of audit culture [Shore & Wright 1999; Power 1997], in which cultural work is primarily assessed through quantifiable metrics. Socio-cultural centres, community-driven spaces fostering artistic, social, and educational practices [Ranczakowska et al. 2024] are increasingly pressured to justify their value through attendance figures, revenue reports, and standardised performance indicators [Belfiore 2002]. This fixation on numerical evaluation obscures the relational and process-based nature of cultural impact [Throsby 2001; Appadurai 1996]. Rather than functioning as *cultural industries* producing measurable outputs, these centres operate within fluid networks of social exchange, identity formation, and local transformation – realities that conventional evaluation models fail to capture [O'Connor 2024; Belfiore & Bennett 2008].

This paper addresses the need to reconsider the frameworks used to assess cultural impact. Drawing on anthropological inquiry, I propose that socio-cultural centres be understood as dynamic, living entities, functioning more like *rhizomes* [Deleuze & Guattari 1987]. In this conceptualisation, impact is not a linear product of input-output calculations but an emergent quality unfolding across multiple, intersecting dimensions of community life. I examine the underlying assumptions of conventional impact assessments and articulate an integrative framework that foregrounds diversity, relationality, and the situated nature of cultural interventions. Furthermore, by incorporating insights from recent research on *reflexive and participatory methods* [Bergold and Thomas 2012], this study highlights how *community narratives* and co-created evaluative practices can capture the details that standard metrics may overlook. The aim is to develop and operationalise a rhizomatic approach to cultural impact in socio-cultural centres and to examine how practitioners navigate audit culture within European policy settings.

Building on these conceptual and empirical premises, emerging from field engagement rather than set *a priori*, the following questions oriented the analysis:

- RQ1:** How do socio-cultural centres navigate and negotiate the pressures of audit culture in their everyday evaluative practices?
- RQ2:** What alternative, informal, or emergent methods of assessing cultural impact are currently used by practitioners, and how do these reflect relational and process-based understandings of value?
- RQ3:** How can the principles of Rhizomatic Impact Evaluation be operationalised within cultural policy and funding systems without losing their interpretive and participatory depth?

These questions structure the analytical trajectory of the article. They are addressed empirically in Section 3, theorised further in Section 4, and revisited in the concluding discussion.

To this end, my research is grounded in empirical data collected from the *European Network of Cultural Centres (ENCC)* – including in-depth interviews, survey responses, and workshop narratives, which reveal the diverse ways socio-cultural centres contribute to community well-being, resilience, and transformation. Yet these contributions remain largely invisible within formal assessment practices that continue to prioritise economic and quantitative metrics. This paper seeks to bridge that gap by offering an interpretive, anthropologically informed approach to impact assessment that captures the full spectrum of socio-cultural dynamics.

Through ethnographic research with the ENCC, I have observed first-hand how practitioners navigate the constraints of instrumentalised frameworks [Bakhshi et al. 2013]. Many centres rely on ad hoc reporting methods to meet funder requirements, even though their most significant impacts arise from non-linear, participatory engagements, like fostering community resilience, facilitating social transitions, and creating spaces for cultural co-creation [White & Robson 2010; Matarasso 1997]. Such work challenges the dominant logic of audit culture [Shore & Wright 2015; Strathern 2000], which privileges quantitative indicators over embedded understandings of cultural value.

Building on these insights, I propose an alternative: *Rhizomatic Impact Evaluation*. Inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's [1987] notion of the *rhizome*, this framework diverges from hierarchical, top-down measurement models in favour of networked, multi-voiced, and relational approaches to assessing cultural impact [Belfiore & Bennett 2008]. Rather than reducing culture to predefined indicators, *Rhizomatic Impact Evaluation* embraces the situated and processual nature of cultural work [Geertz 1973], foregrounding decentralised, adaptive linkages between people, places, and ideas.

Although the examples in this paper primarily reflect the European context of ENCC-affiliated socio-cultural centres, the proposed framework has broader relevance for *community arts organisations, cultural institutions, and local initiatives worldwide* grappling with audit-driven funding regimes. This perspective aligns with *sustainability transition theories* and alternative sustainability models, such as the *X-Curve framework* [Hebinck et al. 2022] which highlight systemic non-linearity and plural transition pathways. By integrating insights from anthropology, cultural policy, and sustainability studies, *Rhizomatic Impact Evaluation* responds to the pressing need for methodologically coherent ways to value complex, adaptive cultural processes.

A common critique of qualitative or anthropologically informed approaches is their perceived incompatibility with funders' accountability requirements and policy demands for standardised data. While acknowledging the necessity of meeting certain basic metrics, this article demonstrates how a *rhizomatic approach* can coexist with, or even enhance conventional frameworks by offering richer, situated accounts of cultural transformation. Rather than positioning qualitative and quantitative methods as mutually exclusive, *Rhizomatic Impact Evaluation* incorporates multiple voices and practitioner-led strategies that can be adapted for different policy environments.

Structure of the article

This article moves from conceptual grounding to situated evidence and then to implications for cultural policy. Section 1 establishes the theoretical frame. I set audit culture within cultural policy debates and show why arborescent, linear logics do not account for relational and processual effects in socio-cultural practice. Section 1.3 then introduces Rhizomatic Impact Evaluation and states its principles, preparing the ground for operationalisation.

Section 2 presents the research design where I describe materials, sites and procedures, situate the study within European policy environments, and summarise ethical considerations. Section 3 turns to the findings. Section 3.2 identifies limits of conventional metrics. Section 3.3 describes hidden and adaptive practices that practitioners already use. Section 3.4 discusses the politics of evaluation and forms of strategic compliance. Section 3.5 documents instances where rhizomatic practice is already present. Section 4 brings these strands together. I synthesise the contribution, set out concise heuristics for policy and funding practice, and indicate directions for further inquiry. and the Conclusion summarises the insights, as well as notes scope and limitations.

1. Theoretical framework

1.1 Beyond industrial metrics: The cultural impact debate

Since the emergence of the *creative industries* paradigm [Hesmondhalgh 2013; O'Connor 2024], contemporary cultural policy has been shaped by the economic instrumentalisation of culture [Belfiore & Bennett 2008]. This paradigm justifies culture primarily through its contributions to economic growth, job creation, and other quantifiable outcomes [Throsby 2001]. However, this approach reflects broader neoliberal restructurings that frame culture as an industry, tethered to performance indicators and financial rationales [Belfiore 2002]. While such perspectives have

streamlined funding mechanisms, they often reduce the complexity of cultural work into reductive metrics.

In contrast, an anthropological approach emphasises the interpretive, relational, and context-dependent nature of cultural phenomena [Geertz 1973]. Culture is deeply embedded in symbolic and relational practices that inherently resist numerical capture. As Bourdieu [1984] argues, cultural value is inextricably linked to social and symbolic capital, which cannot be adequately measured through economic indicators alone.

By situating cultural impact within the lived experiences of communities, researchers can uncover layers of meaning that standard economic evaluations tend to obscure. This perspective aligns with the notion of *invisible work*, as articulated in feminist and postcolonial scholarship, which insists that contributions to social well-being are often unquantifiable yet significant [De Vault 2014; Daniels 1987].

Increasingly, scholars advocate hybrid models of evaluation, recognising that purely quantitative approaches neglect the emergent and non-linear features of cultural processes. Connell [2007] further argues that knowledge co-creation must embrace diverse perspectives, thereby supporting the need for pluralistic, context-sensitive evaluation models. This evolving debate raises questions about the fundamental goals of cultural policy: is cultural value best understood through measurable returns, or should we pivot to more qualitative, interpretive frameworks that accommodate the complexity of socio-cultural work?

1.2 The limitations of audit culture in cultural evaluation

Audit culture [Shore & Wright 1999; Power 1997] extends market-based accountability into public institutions, enforcing standardised templates, benchmarking protocols, and financially oriented key performance indicators (KPIs). In the cultural sector, such frameworks push organisations, including socio-cultural centres into performative compliance, presenting data that may not align with the realities of community-building, creative experimentation, or social transformation [Strathern 2000].

As participants from socio-cultural centres repeatedly note, tension arises when the relational and process-based nature of cultural impact is overshadowed by numerical measures. One interviewee from Cultural Centre D observed:

“We try to plan for a future that lasts decades, not just annual targets. But funders want standardised reports that reduce ‘success’ to attendance figures and financial data. Our real work – fostering critical thinking among youth – is harder to capture in numbers.”

Similarly, while approaches like Florida’s [2002] *creative class* theory promote economic narratives around creative industries, critics argue that such theories

underplay the less tangible, community-driven aspects of cultural work [Pratt 2008; Matarasso 1997]. The result is a hyper-instrumentalisation [O'Connor 2024] that marginalises local, participatory, and process-based forms of cultural engagement in favour of market-driven outputs.

Moreover, reliance on industrial metrics can distort institutional priorities. When socio-cultural centres must continually demonstrate growth such as audience expansion, they risk diluting the community-rooted ethos that defines their missions [White & Robson 2010]. Ultimately, audit culture not only shapes what counts as *impact* but also limits which cultural practices are deemed legitimate or fundable.

Critics have noted that such instrumentalisation imposes quantifiable standards on inherently qualitative creative processes. Foucault's [1977] analysis of modern disciplinary mechanisms further illuminates how institutional practices enforce conformity, mirroring the rigid demands of audit culture. These dynamics contribute to a system in which cultural work is reframed according to external, market-driven expectations rather than its intrinsic community value.

1.3 Toward a rhizomatic impact evaluation framework

1.3.1 Rhizomatic epistemology in cultural evaluation

In *A Thousand Plateaus* [1987], Deleuze and Guattari distinguish between *arborescent* and *rhizomatic* knowledge structures, offering a useful framework for rethinking cultural assessment. In an arborescent model, knowledge or organisation radiates from a single trunk or centre, emphasising hierarchical flows of information. By contrast, a rhizomatic structure, much as an underground root system, lacks a singular origin and instead proliferates through multiple, interconnected pathways. Epistemologically, this approach foregrounds decentralised, non-linear growth; ontologically, it recognises that cultural phenomena emerge from a web of influences rather than from a fixed source.

Such a rhizomatic lens has been applied in educational theory and organisational studies but remains relatively underexplored in cultural evaluation. It challenges traditional, linear models that treat cultural impact as a product of discrete inputs and outputs. Instead, rhizomatic thinking suggests that impact unfolds through diffused networks, adaptive linkages, and overlapping relationships among diverse stakeholders. By mapping these dynamic, interwoven connections which might be called *rhizome-inspired mapping*, researchers can capture the ways in which influence, engagement, and meaning accumulate and disperse over time.

Longitudinal tracking of cultural initiatives reveals how they branch out in unpredictable directions, demonstrating an ongoing interplay of emergent processes rather than a simple cause-and-effect chain. This paradigm shift moves beyond an

exclusive focus on immediate, quantifiable results. Instead, it acknowledges that transformation often takes root in subtle, relational processes like community ties, evolving partnerships, or shifts in collective identity that cannot be distilled into linear metrics.

In many contemporary cultural policy frameworks, assessment tools reflect what Deleuze and Guattari would describe as an *arborescent logic*. Much like a tree's trunk and branches, these tools organise evaluation around a singular core, typically quantitative indicators such as audience numbers, revenue generation, or standardised performance metrics [Belfiore & Bennett 2008]. All subsequent measures derive from this central focus, establishing a hierarchical structure that privileges measurable outputs over processual, relational, or emergent dimensions of cultural work.

1.3.2 Key principles of rhizomatic evaluation

Drawing on the idea of the rhizome, cultural assessment can be reframed through five interconnected principles that emphasise multiplicity, emergence, and situated meaning. These principles challenge the linear, centralised assumptions inherent in many current evaluation models.

- **Multi-voiced participation:** Cultural value emerges through diverse forms of knowledge and experience, ranging from local traditions to artistic expertise, audience perspectives, and community insights [Bourdieu 1984; Connell 2007]. Instead of privileging a single authoritative viewpoint, multi-voiced participation ensures that all stakeholders shape both the goals and methods of assessment.
- **Adaptive emergence:** Culture is inherently dynamic and constantly evolving [O'Connor 2024]. Rhizomatic evaluation allows its criteria and methods to shift in response to changing community needs, socio-political environments, or collaborative developments [Matarasso 1997]. This flexibility contrasts with rigid, one-size-fits-all metrics.
- **Contextualised interpretation:** Rather than relying on decontextualised statistics, this approach prioritises qualitative evidence such as narratives, testimonials, and ethnographic observations [Geertz 1973]. These accounts reveal how cultural initiatives intertwine with local histories, identities, and social relationships.
- **Collaborative documentation:** Documenting impact is not merely a technical step but a co-creative process. By involving community members, artists, and programme organisers in crafting the narrative of what has transpired, collaborative documentation ensures that evaluation reflects the lived realities of those most affected [Shore & Wright 2024].

- **Networked and longitudinal tracking:** Just as rhizomes spread organically underground, cultural influence branches out in multiple, sometimes unseen directions. Rhizomatic evaluation encourages ongoing observation of how new ideas, collaborations, and audiences develop over extended periods [Strathern 2000]. Longitudinal tracking highlights how incremental, relational developments accumulate into substantial transformative effects – outcomes that may only become visible over time [Hebinck et al. 2022].

1.3.3 Implications for cultural evaluation

Taken together, these principles outline a more fluid, adaptive, and inclusive way of evaluating cultural impact. By moving beyond the hierarchical, linear assumptions of arborescent frameworks, rhizomatic evaluation underscores the interconnected, processual nature of cultural work illuminating aspects of value that standard metrics often fail to capture. This model does not necessarily discard quantitative methods; rather, it integrates them within a broader mix of participatory and qualitative inquiry. It aligns evaluation practices more closely with the actual complexity and non-linearity of socio-cultural endeavours, offering a potentially transformative lens for funders, policymakers, and cultural practitioners alike.

The arborescent structure of conventional cultural assessment risks overshadowing the complex networks of influence and engagement, which would be highlighted by approaches that are more rhizomatic.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research design

This study employs an ethnographically informed, mixed-methods approach, combining in-depth interviews, participatory workshops, and survey data collected within the framework of the European Network of Cultural Centres (ENCC). The rationale for this design lies in the limitations of conventional evaluation methodologies, which tend to privilege measurable outputs while overlooking relational, affective, and process-based aspects of cultural work. To foreground these dimensions, the research prioritises qualitative, participatory, and context-sensitive methods [Lincoln & Guba 1985; Fetterman 2010].

The research was conducted over a 12-month period (2023–2024) and follows a multi-sited strategy [Marcus 1995], engaging socio-cultural centres across diverse institutional, geographical, and policy contexts. Sites included centres from eleven European countries (Austria, Belgium, Estonia, Germany, Italy, Poland, Slovenia, Czechia, Latvia, UK and Spain), reflecting variation in size, funding structures, and territorial settings. Centres ranged from small, grassroots initiatives to long-

established organisations embedded within municipal cultural policy systems. This diversity was intentional: it enabled the study to observe how different organisational forms navigate the pressures and contradictions of audit culture.

The conceptual approach of Rhizomatic Impact Evaluation, outlined in Section 2.3, is embedded throughout the research design. Rather than positioning evaluation as a neutral or technical procedure, the study treats it as a situated cultural practice, shaped by institutional logics, historical legacies, and strategic acts of negotiation.

2.2 Data collection

2.2.1 In-depth interviews

A total of 32 in-depth interviews were conducted with practitioners occupying leadership, programming, and evaluation roles within socio-cultural centres. The sample included respondents from both urban and non-urban contexts and from centres with varying degrees of institutionalisation. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, with invitations extended via ENCC networks and partner projects. Interviews followed a semi-structured format, allowing for comparability across cases while maintaining the openness required to capture situated narratives [Charmaz 2006].

The explored themes included:

- experiences with institutional impact frameworks
- tensions and contradictions in applying industrialised metrics to cultural work
- emergent or informal practices that reframe the ways how impact is understood and communicated

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and thematically coded to identify recurring patterns of resistance, adaptation, and situated innovation in relation to cultural evaluation.

2.2.2 Participatory workshops

To complement the interviews and support the co-creation of knowledge, three participatory workshops were facilitated with a total of approximately 130 participants. Each workshop was designed to surface collective reflections on impact, challenge dominant assumptions embedded in evaluation, and explore alternative modes of sense-making.

- **Workshop 1** took place within the ENCC network and brought together 31 participants. Through facilitated group discussions, visual mapping, and short story-sharing rounds, participants identified structural and affective barriers to meaningful evaluation.

- **Workshops 2 and 3** were conducted as part of the FULCRUM project and gathered around 100 participants. These sessions used scenario-based backcasting exercises [Hebinck et al. 2022], collaborative network-drawing, and impact storytelling to imagine future-oriented, non-linear evaluation practices grounded in participants' own cultural settings.

All workshops were documented through fieldnotes, photographs, participant drawings, and live mapping outputs. These artefacts served as both data and interpretive tools. Rather than functioning as discrete research events, the workshops were integrated into existing participatory infrastructures and built upon practices already present in the field.

Alongside the interviews and workshops, I circulated a short, descriptive online survey via ENCC channels to gather contextual information on organisational profiles and evaluation routines; responses were used to orient sampling and triangulate the qualitative analysis rather than as stand-alone findings. The survey was administered to all ENCC members (at that time, sixty eight members), with twenty two responses.

2.3 Data analysis and rhizomatic framework

The analytic strategy follows an iterative, inductive logic consistent with grounded theory approaches [Charmaz 2006]. The starting point was not a fixed set of indicators or categories, but a commitment to let meanings and patterns emerge from the relational entanglements of fieldwork. Transcripts, fieldnotes, surveys, and workshop artefacts were reviewed multiple times to trace how practitioners talked about impact, legitimacy, and value.

The coding process unfolded in three phases. First, open coding was used to identify empirical anchors for broader dynamics: examples included strategic compliance, narrative bifurcation, and affective labour in documentation. Second, focused coding clustered these fragments into thematic categories that correspond with both the critiques of audit culture and the lived tensions described by practitioners. Third, these themes were interpreted through the lens of Rhizomatic Impact Evaluation, allowing the principles introduced in Section 2.3 to function as a conceptual scaffold rather than a deductive framework.

My decision to work with a rhizomatic analytic frame reflects a methodological and epistemological stance. Rather than seeking linear causality, the analysis follows the branching, recursive paths through which impact is enacted, made visible, concealed, or transformed. This includes attending to informal registers such as gossip, repetition, silences, and delayed effects. The final thematic structure is woven through sections 4.2–4.5, with anonymised excerpts integrated into each subsection.

2.4 Reflexivity and ethical considerations

Throughout the process, I worked as both researcher and situated participant. My ongoing collaboration with ENCC and direct engagement in related projects shaped both access and interpretation. Rather than framing this positionality as bias, I consider it part of a reflexive approach to research that foregrounds embedded knowledge production [Geertz 1973]. Being in conversation with practitioners over time allowed for a deeper understanding of the affective and political dimensions of evaluation work.

To maintain ethical rigour:

- informed consent was obtained from all participants
- anonymity was preserved, and centre names were coded
- workshop data was co-validated with participants to ensure interpretive alignment

The methodology reflects an epistemic intervention that resists the reductionist logic of audit culture. By prioritising relational evidence, embedded narration, and multiple temporalities, this approach seeks to offer an alternative way of understanding impact, that is co-produced, situated, and aligned with the lived complexity of socio-cultural practice.

3. Empirical findings: How socio-cultural centres navigate impact assessment

While this chapter is organised around the research questions, the analytical process that generated these insights did not follow a deductive or linear trajectory. The questions themselves emerged in dialogue with the data and served more as interpretive lenses than fixed frames. This reflects the iterative, multi-sited nature of the fieldwork, which unfolded through cycles of ethnographic observation, thematic coding, and collective reflection. Structuring the chapter in this way is therefore a matter of reader orientation rather than methodological choice. The presentation here supports clarity, while remaining grounded in a qualitative approach that privileges emergence, context, and the situated nature of knowledge production.

3.1 Introduction of the findings

The question of how socio-cultural centres assess impact reveals a persistent tension: the imposed logic of *audit culture* versus the lived realities of cultural work. While funding bodies and policy frameworks demand quantifiable, standardised evaluation metrics, practitioners describe their impact as relational, emergent, and processual embedded in the temporal, affective, and social infrastructures of community life.

Across my research with socio-cultural centres, practitioners articulated a fundamental misalignment between:

- **The epistemology of audit culture**, which frames cultural value through numerical indicators, economic return, and standardised KPIs.
- **The ontological realities of socio-cultural work**, where impact materialises through fluid, networked, and context-sensitive exchanges.

This misalignment reflects a system of power over cultural institutions, shaping which forms of impact are seen, valued, and legitimised. As this section demonstrates, socio-cultural centres:

- Struggle within imposed evaluation frameworks, navigating the pressures of compliance while resisting reductive metrics.
- Develop, often unintentionally, informal and alternative methods of impact assessment that remain largely invisible within funding regimes.
- Articulate a need for systemic change, positioning alternative evaluation methods as both a necessary methodological intervention and a political act.

By highlighting these dynamics, this research foregrounds evaluation not as a neutral technical exercise, but as a contested ideological terrain where cultural practitioners negotiate power, autonomy, and legitimacy.

3.2 The limits of conventional impact metrics

Despite the diversity of socio-cultural centres, nearly all participants described frustration with conventional impact assessment methods, which reduce cultural impact to attendance figures, ticket sales, and standardised KPIs. One director of a regional centre expressed this concern:

How do you measure transformation in a number? How do you prove a shift in someone's sense of belonging through a survey? The system requires numbers, but we deal in relationships. (Centre P)

This sentiment was echoed across multiple centres, particularly those with a strong community engagement focus. While some centres attempt to comply with funding requirements by quantifying success, many describe these processes as distortions rather than reflections of their actual work. A coordinator from Centre K explained:

We fill in the reports, of course. But internally, we know they don't reflect our work. So, we keep parallel records like stories, narratives, feedback, things that actually tell us what's happening. (Centre K)

This reliance on a dual documentation system, one for funders and one for internal reflection, illustrates how practitioners strategically reframe impact

narratives to maintain operational viability while safeguarding their actual values. In some cases, this parallelism became a form of resistance, a quiet insistence on defining value on their own terms. A practitioner from Centre I added:

We work in the in-between. We translate our values into funder-speak, but then we also keep the real story alive within our team. It's not ideal, but it's how we protect the work. (Centre I)

Several centres described this process as laborious and ethically compromising. Reporting becomes an act of translation and sometimes self-censorship. As one team member noted in a workshop:

We do the reporting, but we always ask ourselves who are we doing this for? Because our participants don't care about how many 'engagements' we had. They care that they felt seen. (Centre L)

The work of translation between lived realities and imposed metrics not only drains time and resources but also alienates practitioners from their own sense of purpose. This gap between official narratives and internal practices is the place where new forms of impact assessment, more informal, more embedded and relational, and largely invisible to institutional eye begins to take shape.

3.3 Adaptations: Hidden forms of evaluation

Since traditional metrics often fail to capture the realities of cultural work, many centres have developed alternative assessment strategies that exist alongside, or in resistance to, formal reporting structures. These include storytelling, embedded observation, and relational tracking. Together, they offer a counterpoint to audit culture's linear, extractive logic and instead reflect the processual, intuitive, and community-driven nature of socio-cultural practice.

3.3.1 Storytelling as impact assessment

Rather than relying on predefined indicators, some centres turn to narrative-based approaches to track transformation. A practitioner from Centre K reflected:

Our best 'data' comes from conversations with our participants. A funding report might say we had 200 people attend, but what really matters is the email someone sent us weeks later, saying the event changed how they see their own community. (Centre K)

These narrative fragments are often informal, held in memory, email inboxes, or staff debriefs, and do not enter official evaluation documentation. Nevertheless,

they shape internal understandings of success and guide future programming. At Centre S, for example, a practitioner shared an observation:

The moment someone tells us, 'I finally felt like I liked it here,' that's when we know something worked. But there's no line for that in the form. (Centre S)

This shift from numerical validation to lived testimony echoes anthropological methodologies that prioritise thick description, situated meaning-making, and embedded knowledge production [Geertz 1973]. However, these forms of assessment remain unrecognised by dominant policy frameworks, reinforcing the systemic devaluation of qualitative epistemologies.

3.3.2 Networked observation and reflexive evaluation

Some centres practise embedded, relational evaluation through informal tools such as fieldnotes, shared reflections, and mapping exercises that track how relationships evolve over time. A coordinator at Centre D described their internal method:

For us, impact isn't about 'how many people came' but 'who now collaborates that didn't before?' We map relationships, not numbers. (Centre D)

Others described using reflective meetings or ongoing conversations as methods of evaluation. Rather than closing a project with a final report, some teams maintain open-ended dialogue with participants and partners to understand long-term effects. At Centre N, this practice is integrated into how programming is designed:

We don't think of evaluation as something you do at the end. It's ongoing. Every conversation is part of it. Every shift in someone's involvement tells us something. (Centre N)

These reflexive and networked approaches often remain invisible in external reporting, but they are central to how centres understand change. While not formalised, they provide an infrastructure of care and accountability that is attuned to context, relationships, and the long arc of cultural engagement.

3.4 Tensions and resistance: the politics of evaluation

Despite the innovations described above, practitioners repeatedly emphasised the tensions they navigate when balancing funding compliance with the ethics and integrity of their work. Evaluation is not a neutral practice. It is a site of negotiation, often shaped by external pressures that require organisations to frame their cultural work in ways that obscure its actual meaning.

Three recurring tensions emerged across the interviews and workshops:

- The pressure to frame cultural work in economic or outcome-based terms in order to justify funding.
- Strategic compliance, where centres complete audit-friendly reports while maintaining parallel internal evaluation systems.
- A sense of cultural alienation, as practitioners feel that their work must be translated into bureaucratic language that fails to capture its relational, affective, or political dimensions.

A practitioner from Centre I captured this conflict:

Every grant application now asks us to prove economic impact. We resist that, but we also have to survive. So, we end up playing along, even if it undermines what we're actually doing. (Centre I)

This sense of double consciousness – one face for the funders, another for the community – was echoed across multiple interviews. A coordinator at Centre L described their internal documentation practice:

We write what the funders want to read, but that's not how we talk about our work with each other. We have other ways of knowing what works. We share stories, we reflect, we feel it. (Centre L)

While they may appear pragmatic, for many, these parallel systems are primarily political. Choosing to maintain internal languages and practices of evaluation that resist the imposed categories of audit culture is seen as a form of everyday resistance. A practitioner at Centre T reflected:

Sometimes I think the real impact isn't even visible. It's in what you can't really measure. The way someone comes back to volunteer. The way a new partnership happens. These things matter, but they're not part of the forms that we are given to fill in. (Centre T)

Even within these constraints, practitioners insist on the legitimacy of their own ways of knowing. Through these informal practices, centres focus on forms of value that remain outside institutional recognition.

3.5 Signs of a rhizomatic approach in practice

Despite the dominance of industrialised evaluation models, many socio-cultural centres already engage in assessment practices that align with the principles of Rhizomatic Impact Evaluation. These practices emerge not from adherence to external models, but from lived experiences of cultural work. Rather than designing alternative evaluation frameworks in a top-down manner, these centres embed

impact assessment within their day-to-day practices, drawing from relationships, collective learning, and slow processes of change.

At Centre B, practitioners described how they trace the ripples of artistic residencies over time, mapping informal connections and long-term collaborations:

We don't measure impact by how many people came to the opening night. We look at what happened months later. Who kept in touch? What new ideas grew out of it? (Centre B)

Rather than working within pre-defined timelines and indicators, Centre B focuses on how artistic encounters generate emergent networks of support, care, and future practice. This approach values the durational and affective dimensions of impact, even if they are difficult to report through standard forms.

A similar approach was described at Centre N, where evaluation is woven into everyday practice rather than treated as a separate task.

Instead of closing conversations around evaluation, we seek to sustain them, allowing feedback to be generative rather than judgmental. (Centre N)

Evaluation, in this case, is ongoing and dialogic, shaped by shared reflection and mutual accountability between staff, artists, and communities.

This centre also practices a barter-based model, where artists offer workshops or performances in exchange for local contributions, rather than financial fees. This reciprocal framing of value displaces the dominant logic of cultural production as a transactional service and reframes it as a process of exchange and mutual commitment.

We want to shift from counting to connecting. If someone cooks for the artist, if someone offers a ride, that is part of the impact. (Centre N)

These examples suggest that rhizomatic approaches are not only possible, but already present, albeit in fragmented and often unrecognised forms. They emerge from necessity, from care for community, and from the refusal to reduce cultural value to fixed indicators or simplified outputs. Importantly, they are rarely named as such by practitioners themselves, but they reveal a different language of evaluation, that is based on interconnection, lived meaning, and slow transformation.

4. Theoretical synthesis and future research directions

4.1 Reframing impact assessment: From audit culture to relational evaluation

The growing divergence between imposed evaluation frameworks and the lived realities of cultural practice presents an urgent challenge for policymakers and

cultural institutions. While socio-cultural centres continue to develop alternative ways of assessing their impact, these methods remain largely unrecognised within funding structures that prioritise measurable, outcome-driven models. Beyond being an administrative inconvenience, this disconnection has profound consequences for how cultural work is valued, legitimised, and sustained.

As shown in the previous sections, this divergence is not experienced uniformly. Centres shared different strategies for navigating it, often shaped by their organisational scale, histories, and funding dependencies. For some, resistance took the form of parallel evaluation systems: one for funders, one for themselves.

We fill in the reports, of course. But internally, we keep records that actually tell us what's happening. (Centre P)

Others adopted hybrid strategies, blending compliance with creative adaptation, or embedding impact reflection directly into artistic and community processes. These variations signal that while the pressures of audit culture are shared, the responses remain context-sensitive, shaped by local relationships and institutional cultures.

A critical shift is needed to expand evaluation criteria beyond key performance indicators and embrace more participatory, process-oriented models. Funding bodies must acknowledge that relational, community-driven forms of assessment are not secondary to economic metrics but essential to understanding cultural impact. Without such recognition, the current system risks reinforcing a model where only what is quantifiable is deemed valuable, while deeper forms of cultural transformation remain invisible.

This research has shown that such transformations are often traced through informal observation, embedded feedback, and collaborative reflection. Centres described the value of noticing subtle shifts, how trust builds across projects, or how networks evolve over time.

It's not about how many people came, but who now collaborates that didn't before. (Centre D)

These are not anecdotal details but integral parts of how impact is known and felt by practitioners themselves. Importantly, these methods do not seek to replace quantitative evaluation entirely, but to offer a fuller account of cultural work.

Cultural management and educational practices must also evolve to align with these realities. Training programmes should move beyond compliance-based evaluation models and incorporate methodologies that reflect the actual ways in which cultural practitioners assess their work. This means engaging with qualitative, ethnographic, and participatory approaches that emphasise lived experience over extractive measurement. Institutions, in turn, must rethink internal evaluation

structures, shifting away from rigid reporting requirements towards more flexible, evolving frameworks that allow cultural organisations to articulate their impact in ways that resonate with their missions and communities.

For socio-cultural centres, the implications of *Rhizomatic Impact Evaluation* extend beyond assessment itself. Resisting audit culture is a transformative intervention in how cultural work is understood and valued. These practices are not imposed from theory but emerge from situated experimentation. At Centre N, for example, evaluation is structured as an ongoing dialogue with community members, where artistic and social outcomes are discussed not only after the fact but throughout the process. This dialogic approach, sometimes taking the form of barter or reciprocal exchange, reflects a deeper commitment to accountability grounded in mutual recognition rather than institutional surveillance.

By continuing to document impact through relational, process-based methods, these centres contribute to a broader reimagining of evaluation in cultural policy, one that moves beyond instrumentalist logic and towards an approach that reflects the fluid, networked, and participatory nature of cultural production.

Ultimately, besides being a policy adjustment, rethinking impact assessment is an epistemic and political intervention. If only what can be measured is valued, entire ways of knowing and practising culture risk being erased from dominant discourse. Socio-cultural centres, which operate through relational, evolving, and embedded forms of engagement, find themselves navigating a system that often fails to recognise the very nature of their work. *Rhizomatic Impact Evaluation* offers a pathway towards reclaiming impact assessment as a process of meaning-making rather than control, ensuring that cultural practitioners are not only assessed but understood on their own terms.

4.2 Future research directions

The findings of this study open several critical avenues for further research. Comparative work could explore how alternative evaluation models operate across different cultural and policy contexts, tracing where and how non-linear approaches to impact assessment have been formalised or legitimised. It would be particularly valuable to examine cases where rhizomatic or relational methodologies have found resonance within institutional settings, without being co-opted or diluted by audit logics.

Another promising direction lies in the intersection of digital technology and relational impact assessment. With the rise of digital ethnography, participatory mapping, and decentralised knowledge-sharing tools, new ways of tracing and representing impact are emerging. These tools could support more dynamic, collaborative approaches to evaluation, expanding the space for cultural organisations

to articulate their own logics of value. The potential of digital methods to both surface and legitimise alternative impact narratives, especially in contexts shaped by policy silencing or institutional gatekeeping, deserves closer attention.

Further research is also needed to better understand the structural barriers that continue to marginalise non-linear and qualitative forms of evaluation. While practitioners already engage in relational forms of assessment, these often remain secondary to dominant reporting regimes. Without structural shifts in how evaluation is conceptualised at the policy level, these approaches will remain in the shadows – useful, meaningful, but ultimately unofficial. Future research could focus on the mechanisms of policy change that might enable the integration of rhizomatic approaches into funding logics, while preserving their situated and participatory character.

In this way, the aim is not only to document what exists, but to contribute to a broader field of inquiry that helps reimagine how impact can be understood, practised, and legitimised in the cultural sector.

Conclusion: Toward an evaluation framework that reflects cultural realities

Throughout this study, I have explored how socio-cultural centres navigate the contradictory demands of impact assessment. While dominant cultural policy frameworks continue to privilege linear, quantitative models of evaluation, socio-cultural practitioners are developing alternative methods that are processual, embedded, and relational. These practices are not framed as resistance in a confrontational sense but emerge through the daily work of doing culture under pressure. They are shaped by necessity, by care for communities, and by the long timelines of change that do not easily fit measurable outputs.

By staying close to the lived realities of practitioners, I traced how socio-cultural centres respond to the imposed logic of audit culture (RQ1), how they adapt or subvert dominant models (RQ2), and how relational, situated evaluation practices emerge in the absence of institutional recognition (RQ3). The findings show that although most centres still comply with funder requirements, many operate parallel internal, informal systems of evaluation, internal, grounded in trust, exchange, and long-term engagement.

This research does not aim to offer another normative, universal model, but rather to legitimise these alternative practices as forms of knowing that matter. By articulating the Rhizomatic Impact Evaluation framework, I wanted to bring visibility to an approach that is already present, even if rarely acknowledged. This framework helps conceptualise evaluation not as an external process of measurement,

but as a situated, evolving negotiation of value, meaning, and accountability within specific cultural and social contexts.

As long as impact continues to be defined through narrow metrics, the work of socio-cultural centres will remain undervalued and misrepresented. Yet the practices described throughout this paper suggest that another approach is both possible and already underway. This study invites a reframing of evaluation itself, – as a technicality of cultural policy, as well as a political and epistemic field where assumptions about value are negotiated and wherein different ways of knowing can be centred.

For cultural policy, this means recognising the legitimacy of plural evaluation practices, co-created with communities, and responsive to the specific missions of organisations. For researchers and educators, it calls for closer engagement with the situated knowledge of practitioners and with the ongoing work of building frameworks that reflect the reality of cultural life.

Rather than proposing one method, I have tried to stay with the complexity. If Rhizomatic Impact Evaluation is to be useful, it must remain open-ended, relational, and in motion.

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