

## **Empowering Audiences to Measure Quality**

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### **Abstract**

This paper addresses four indicators of the audience experience in the performing arts: knowledge, risk, authenticity and collective engagement, and argues that these provide a measure of the audience's experience of the quality of a performance. Qualitative interviews with four performing arts companies demonstrated a range of strategies for gathering audience feedback. In particular, the paper addresses systems for gathering 'deep feedback' by audiences, and argues that these are a means of collecting information about the quality of the audience experience. 'Deep feedback' is a critical mechanism by which performing arts organisations can engage in audience development and audiences are empowered to measure quality.

### **Introduction**

Performing arts companies throughout the world are currently under pressure for three reasons: the increasing demand to provide and measure key performance indicators in all aspects of the business of the company, including audience and product development; the changed role of the audience to consumer and co-creator (Etgar, 2008; Newell, cited in Scheff Bernstein, 2007, p. 252; Wheeler, 2004); and the competition from mediated performance through digital technologies (Brown, 2004). These are linked by the relationship and role of the audience with the company. Audiences are measured by attendance numbers, by membership or subscription, by demographics and product preference, by satisfaction and complaint, and by modes of attendance. Audiences are engaging more fully in productions, expecting to participate in blogs, to meet artists, to join audience clubs seeking deeper information and opinion sharing, and to take a role of discovery in new venues and seating arrangements for their preferred performing arts program. And finally, audiences are feeling challenged in their quest for a live performance by opportunities to experience a performance

on their home theatre system, or see world famous opera in their favourite cinema. Audience feedback has provided companies with this information, and yet much audience feedback has been collected in satisfaction surveys, rather than exploring the audience experience of the live performance.

### **The audience experience**

'Audience evaluation takes a multitude of forms — historically, culturally, and situationally — but evaluation is a constitutive part of performance' (Bell, 2008, p. 32). The audience's experience is an intrinsic part of the performance event, and can influence the actual performance, even in situations in which the audience is not expected to provide obvious feedback except in the form of the traditional applause at conventional moments. Petkus (2004, p.54), in his analysis of experiential marketing in the arts, argues that companies should look for creative ways to solicit feedback because 'by involving the audience in the process, the feedback can be perceived as part of the overall arts experience'. In practice this was explained by Nicolette Fraillon, Music Director and Chief Conductor of the Australian Ballet: 'The energy is incredibly dependent on what is coming back from an audience. I don't think audiences are aware of the impact they can have on a performance' (Percival, 2008, p. 11). A comment by Elaine Acworth on the Performing Arts blog of *Our Brisbane*, brings another thread to the co-creation aspect of the audience experience:

I think, in a good piece of work, an audience can expand the meaning that they read there. I think there's a space made in the work — in that place mid-way between the actors and the participants sitting in the dark — where the possibility of layered meanings exists — the resonances of an individual audience member's life making themselves heard in and around the performance (Acworth 2009).

The authors of this paper have identified four specific indicators of audience experience that contribute to the audience's evaluation of the quality of a performance. These are knowledge, risk, authenticity and collective engagement.

**Knowledge** is concerned with the audience need for information to enable a better understanding or perspective of the performance with which they are engaging (Kawashima, 2000; 2006). This can include developing programs or seasons around a topic, theme or artist; visual enhancements to add to or magnify the performance; self-interpretive aids prior to the performance such as programs or websites; and interpretive assistance within the performance such as conductors' or directors' talks (Brown, 2004). The rationale for utilising a

knowledge strategy is that the better the understanding of the performance, the greater the appreciation, leading to an enriched experience and heightened possibility of return visitation (Kawashima, 2000; 2006).

**Risk** refers to the possibility of the audience feeling either loss or gain in attendance and participation in performance. Colbert et al. (2001, p. 81–83) describe four related kinds of risk that determine the likelihood of reconsumption for theatre goers: functional risk (the possibility that the product may not meet the consumer's expectation); economic risk (in which cost complicates the decision-making process); psychological risk (in which the product may pose a threat to the self-image the consumer wishes to have) and social risk (concerned with how the consumer wishes to be perceived by other people). The onus is on arts companies to enhance the perception of positive risk and minimise the perception of negative risk.

In the context of the performing arts, **authenticity** can broadly be defined as 'a form of truth within the performing arts event'. The greater the authenticity of a performance perceived by audience members, the greater their enjoyment of the experience. Authenticity has two main components. One is the authenticity of what is offered: such as whether the performance is of sufficient technical standard, or whether the music is faithful to the score. The second component to authenticity in the performing arts is that of the audience's emotional perception. Wang (1999, p. 353) writes: 'That which is judged as inauthentic or staged authenticity by experts, intellectuals or elite may be experienced as authentic and real from an emic perspective.' In the context of the performing arts, audience members may therefore experience a performance as 'authentic' even though it may not be faithful to its original script or score (modern words inserted into Shakespearean plays, for example, or Baroque music performed on electronic instruments).

**Collective engagement** is the audience's sense that they are engaged with the performer(s) and other audience members, and/or in discussion with others before or after the performance they have attended (see Boorsma, 2006; Jacobs, 2000; McCarthy et al., 2004). In this way, audience experience at performing arts events has clear parallels with spectator experience of sporting events: a respondent in *The Arts Debate: Findings of Research Among the General Public*, for example, spoke of the 'high' experienced as an audience member during a choral concert as being 'like going to a football match ... and it just peaks and then it is just like scoring a goal' (Creative Research, 2007, p. 78). Graham (1997, p. 19) similarly writes that, in watching sport with others, 'the individual can get swept up in a communal involvement which cannot be articulated in words'.

Collective engagement can be verbal as well as nonverbal, intrapersonal as well as interpersonal: Jacobs (2000) finds that after attending a performing arts event, college students noted that while attendance produced anxiety (for the reasons outlined under *Risk* above), the 'co-presence in the concert hall of so many other people, especially people of diverse backgrounds, enhanced their evening's enjoyment, as did the opportunity to talk with others about the performances' (Jacobs, 2000, p. 135). Eversmann (2004, p. 171) underscores the importance of both the intra-personal and the inter-personal in the spectator's experience of the theatre: '[W]hile the emotional and perceptual dimensions are experienced individually, the cognitive analysis of a production is to a large extent a collective phenomenon, which may enhance the spectator's insight in a performance through communication with other audience members'. Reason (2004) summarises focus group research conducted after a theatre performance by noting how the group mentioned 'the proximity of the actors, the sense of immediacy, the possibility of something going wrong, awareness of other audience members, a sense that other people are having a different experience with a different perspective, the sense that it is a one-off event never to be repeated and a feeling of community with other audience members'.

### **Quality and the audience experience**

Audience feedback from previous research with three performing arts organisations confirmed that the experience described by audience members comprised these four indicators and was their personal measure of the quality of that performance. Focus groups with subscribers and audience members who had never attended a performance of the company provided very similar responses and descriptions of their experience. Following research by Boerner and Rentz (2008, p. 22), we determined that the audience experience could provide data to arts organisations that would be as beneficial to assessments of the quality of their work as expert measurement by critics and peers (Radbourne, Glow, Johanson and White, 2009).

Traditionally, quality is measured by such means as peer and critical review (Tobias, 2004; Voss and Voss, 2000); attendance and subscriber levels, number of performances, number of new productions, earned-income (Allman, 1994 and Schugk, 1996, both cited in Boerner and Rentz, 2008); the reputation of the company, artist, conductor or director; receipt of honours and awards; festival participation and sponsorship and grants. Measurement by public arts funding and policy-making bodies of quality in the arts experience has given little regard to the various factors that contribute to the audience's experience. In Australia, successive generations of public inquiries (IAC, 1976; McLeay, 1986; Nugent, 1999) have investigated and made recommendations on the way public funding should be allocated to the performing arts. These reports have often been critical of the fact that public funding has privileged the

'supply side' of artistic production with too little attention to demand for the arts and called for more research into the demographics and interests of potential audiences. Federal and state government arts agencies now produce guides for artists and arts organisations into developing and using audience research (for example, Close and Donovan, 1998; Tomlinson and Roberts, 2006).

In July 2008, US arts philanthropy expert Diane Ragsdale cajoled Australian performing arts organisations, saying, 'We must understand that audience development is not about derrieres in chairs, but rather about brokering a relationship between people and art' (Ragsdale, 2008). Where once audiences were seen as primarily passive (Wheeler, 2004; Boorsma 2006), now it is acknowledged that the audience contributes to what Lusch and Vargo refer to as the 'co-creation of value' (cited in Etgar, 2008, p. 108). Research by Radbourne (2007) identifies that 'the new arts consumer is on a quest for self-actualisation where the creative or cultural experience is expected to fulfil a spiritual need that has very little to do with the traditional marketing plan of an arts company or organisation', demonstrating that '[a]udiences ... will be fiercely loyal if they can experience fulfilment and realisation in the arts experience'. Other scholars comment that as active participants in the creation of artistic quality, the arts sector itself must ask 'What is the consumption value that practitioners in the cultural sector seek to produce ... [and] what role does the industry want the spectator to play in forming this value?' (Mencarelli and Pulh, 2006, p. 20). Petkus (2004, p. 54) claims that 'Arts patrons who feel that they have had a part in creating future arts experiences are likely to be loyal, dedicated patrons.' Audiences increasingly want to shape their own experience, and marketing strategies should be refocussed on empowering audiences, not targeting them (Newell, cited in Scheff Bernstein, 2007, p. 252).

This paper examines the extent to which systems for gathering audience feedback respond to the four indicators of quality described above. Given that audience repeat attendance and loyalty are measures of success used by funding agencies, and audience satisfaction with the quality is recognised in the literature (Boerner and Renz, 2008) as equivalent in certain instances to expert measurement of quality, then it is vital to empower audiences and validate the audience experience as a new measure of quality in the performing arts.

### **The Arts Audience Experience Index**

Rather than implementing regular multiple surveys to analyse the audience experience, a simple measurement scale applied to any audience feedback tool would serve performing arts companies more effectively. This scale is the Arts Audience Experience Index. It requires

arts organisations to measure four quality indicators derived from the most common audience needs and expectations: knowledge transfer or learning, risk management, authenticity, and collective engagement.

**Table 1. The Arts Audience Experience Index**

	<b>Audience experience quality indicators</b>	<b>Attributes of each indicator</b>	<b>Metric rating</b>
(a)	Knowledge transfer or learning	Extent to which there is contextual programming, visual enhancements, program information, pre-show or conductor talks or meet the director after-the-show talks. These strategies function to facilitate new understandings, linking experience to self knowledge, and self development in audience members.	1–5
(b)	Risk management	Commitment to managing risk, through program knowledge, previews, comfort and accessibility, personalised communication, quality guarantee expectation, value for money.	1–5
(c)	Authenticity	Capacity to achieve believability, meaning and representation, sincerity, performance matches promotional description, performers engaged in own performances, performers' relationship with audience.	1–5
(d)	Collective engagement	Ensuring expectations of social contact and inclusion are met, including shared experience, social constructs and meaning, common values, live experience, interaction or understanding between performers and audience, clues to behaviour, discussion after the performance.	1–5

The Index is based on the sum of (a) + (b) + (c) + (d). Each indicator is rated from 1–5 as follows:

1-2 = minimal quality audience experience

3 = moderate quality audience experience

4 = moderately high quality audience experience

5 = high quality audience experience.

Thus each indicator can be measured, or the total (out of 20 points) can be used to define the quality of the company's audience experience achievement.

The Index is both a tool for arts companies to access audience feedback on the quality indicators, and a management and marketing tool for programming and development.

### **Methodology**

In order to examine the effectiveness of existing systems of accessing audience feedback by performing arts companies, this paper uses in-depth interviews with marketing managers at four Australian performing arts companies as its method. Where companies appoint audience representatives to formal feedback positions or panels, the study also uses interviews with such representatives.

The in-depth interviews were generally conducted at the arts company, where four non-directive questions enabled responses to be probed and clarified. The authors prepared for the interviews together, exploring the questions and expected answers, and the ways in which responses would elicit information on the four indicators of the audience experience. This 'rehearsal' ensured there would be no bias in guiding the content of the responses, and that prompting and probing would focus responses on the topics underlying each question. Two interviewers attended each interview. The interviews were taped and lasted approximately one hour.

The four questions were:

1. In what ways do you actively seek audience feedback to your organisation?
2. What are the key things you have learned about the audience experience from this feedback?
3. How does your organisation utilise audience feedback?
4. Is this (process of getting audience feedback) successful, and how do you know?

Question 1 was intended to produce a list of methods the companies use to obtain audience feedback. It was also intended to provide a context for the company's deliberate relationship with its audience, particularly in seeking knowledge, learning, information and values.

Question 2 was the key question in providing the researchers with information about the company's interpretation of feedback content around new learnings and understandings of their audiences, such as their capacity to take risks or self-manage the risk of attendance and participation, their expectations of a performance, their relationships and reactions to performers and the artistic program, their social needs in terms of sharing with other audience members and the effect of a live performance, their personal needs against values of believability and self-actualisation, and the potential for this audience to describe their experience in terms of quality and repeat attendance.

Questions 3 and 4 were designed to gain an understanding of how the companies accept the feedback and incorporate findings from it in the way they program future productions. In essence, we wanted to know if the companies attributed the audience feedback as a potential measure of quality, and had thereby empowered their audiences to contribute to the company's development. In this paper, 'empowerment' refers to genuine representation of the audience's interests, drawn from their experiences, in decision-making by the organisation. The researchers deemed that if companies were using audience feedback, then with appropriate tools, the audience experience could be measured within the proposed Index, and this Index will contribute to management and marketing decision-making.

We chose four performing arts companies on the basis of our participant observation and experience, that each of them uses, and has consistently used over time, identifiable methods of gathering audience feedback. These methods are such that can be described and analysed.

#### Company 1 (Contemporary Dance)

In May 2002, the dance company created a new production that was based on an audience poll. The artistic director had commissioned a national survey of dance audiences, asking them what they most wanted to see in a dance performance, and used a compilation of responses to construct the production. The production received extensive media coverage, and there was a range of critical responses, some finding the work humorous (Roberts, 2002; Gibson, 2003) and others arguing that the work was a significant innovation as a self-reflexive and satirical dance piece (Christofis, 2002). These expert assessments of the production's aesthetic achievements are one measure of the quality of the work. However, we note that

this particular production was primarily concerned with garnering audience feedback and using these materials to shape programming decisions.

Company 2 (Children's theatre company)

This company has, over many years, developed the use of work-in-progress showings to audiences as a means of gathering audience feedback. The company uses a range of methods including post-show surveys, phone interviews, and a website during the creative process and post-show (Myers, 2005, p. 27). Using audience feedback, the company seeks to create work that is 'a transaction of mutual engagement or a dialogue between the artists ... and young people' (Myers, 2005, p. 30). The active gathering of audience feedback through post-show surveys and website discussions is a recognised and well-established strategy of many children's and young people's theatre companies, and such feedback is seen to have had 'a positive impact on the quality, relevance and range of work' on offer (Hunter and Milne, 2005, p. 5).

Company 3 (Contemporary theatre company)

Since 2005, this company has operated a group made up of individuals who are local residents, from a range of vocations, selected by the company on the basis of their interest in cultural expression. The title given by the company is the Artistic Counsel, because the group offers ongoing advice. Members give individual feedback to the company on its artistic activities, and the Counsel provides a forum for debate and discussion. Counsel members are appointed for two to three years and are invited to attend the company's productions and other programs and activities. They are asked to write and submit their responses to the work of the company, and participate in several group conversations with the company's executive team twice a year. The written responses of the Counsel members do not have to be presented in any particular way, but are expected to be candid, and to focus on the issue of the quality of productions and programming choices.

Company 4 (Performing arts venue)

This is a regional arts venue which, like most arts centres, is expected to fulfil a community service obligation (Radbourne, 1999), that is, programming for community development and taxpayer ownership satisfaction. This obligation entails the provision of a range of services including opportunities for local arts groups to perform or exhibit, providing a facility for local audiences to see touring events, and to operate as part of a vibrant regional cultural precinct. While the venue's managers see they have a responsibility to satisfy and develop audiences, they are constrained in their programming by the availability of product and venue spaces. The venue gathers audience feedback by means of its 'Theatre Club' — a club for member/subscribers. Such a feedback mechanism encourages collective engagement;

however, the emphasis here is less on the quality of the audience experience and more on the venue's service quality framework around customer service, teamwork and safety.

### **Discussion resulting from interviews**

The companies reported means of collecting feedback that fall into four broad categories: solicited, passive feedback; unsolicited feedback; spontaneous, informal feedback; and 'deep feedback'. Solicited, passive feedback includes audience surveys, recurring subscriptions and phone questionnaires. In such feedback, audiences may be asked to respond to predetermined questions, but the subsequent questions are not responsive to the answers they have previously given. Such feedback is better suited to factual information about the audience rather than in-depth information about their experience of the performance.

As an example, the marketing manager of Company 1 described the company's use of an audience survey which is distributed and collected at the end of each performance. The two kinds of information the survey elicited were about the demographics of the audience and how they knew of the production. The information collected through surveys is used to inform marketing decisions, such as the publications in which to advertise. The use of the information appeared to be restricted to marketing, rather than programming or artistic decisions, or the kind of extra-performance decisions that would represent responsiveness to the four indicators. Staff at the company were wary and careful not to 'bombard' the audience with 'too many questions' in the surveys, and the artistic director reported that he 'never read or looked at those surveys' because he did not want such information to influence his artistic work. In contrast, there were no formal feedback structures in place at the dance company to collect and use data about the quality of the audience's experience. The marketing manager reported: 'I don't really know if [the audiences' experience of the company's performances] is what our audiences are wanting ... What we are not asking people ... is [about] their experiences when they are at the shows and perhaps we could do that.'

A second type of feedback used by the companies is unsolicited feedback, which includes audience members' phone calls or emails to the company following a show or, as one interviewee reported, 'they bail me up in foyers and various places'. In an era in which instant means of communication are readily available, it is interesting that staff of two companies identified that they had been sent long and unsolicited letters by an audience member, which had each provided unexpectedly valuable information about the audience member's experience. The artistic director of one of these companies noted that the letter he received, 'was really their thoughts and quite well thought out and really interesting'.

In contrast, spontaneous, informal feedback is often sought by staff who casually observe the behaviour of the audience during or after a show. When asked how he knows what the quality of the audience's experience has been, one artistic director reported, 'I can see it in their faces ... I can see it happening in the room'. Another interviewee explained that she sought feedback from the company's large number of volunteers, not only about performances but about other aspects of the theatre experience. In discussion, another artistic director noted that post-performance bar sales were a useful indicator of the audience's experience: the higher the sales the more comfortable and satisfied the audience felt.

Both unsolicited and spontaneous forms of feedback are highly valued and important strategies used by all companies in the study, largely for the candour of the audience in such situations. However, as methods of research they are both flawed: by definition unsolicited feedback cannot be guaranteed to be representative of the audience as a whole; and spontaneous feedback such as casual observation in the foyer and bar is subject to interpretation.

The final means of collecting feedback we have coined 'deep feedback'. The distinguishing features of deep feedback methods are that they progressively build on information given, usually through lengthy discussions with audience members, and they allow for audiences to direct the feedback to what aspects of their experience they consider worthy of discussion. In this way, deep feedback uses deliberate and structured measures to result in the kind of candid feedback that is offered by unsolicited and spontaneous feedback, and is tailored to the specific performance. Two of the companies whose staff were interviewed were in the process of putting in place means for gathering deep feedback. The regional performing arts venue has a 'Theatre Club', consisting of people who are invited to attend the second performance of each production. The general manager explained that while such gatherings are chiefly social, the club members are asked to 'do a de-brief and where possible one or two of the cast will come out and meet with them as well. And they'll give feedback, but we don't document it in any way'. When interviewed, the children's theatre company was in the early stages of establishing a website in which children, young adults and teachers were invited to participate in blogging with company staff. In addition to providing feedback to the companies, these activities served purposes for the participants that are consistent with the indicators central to the study: both methods fostered a sense of collective engagement and enhanced the participants' sense of knowledge about the performance. The choice of such measures — a social forum and electronic communication — is also appropriate to the different demographic characteristics of the relevant audiences.

The contemporary theatre company has a well-established deep feedback system through its Artistic Counsel. This theatre company chooses and invites people to become members of

the Artistic Counsel on the basis that they are 'very culturally literate'. At the time of our interview, Counsel members included theatre practitioners, but also academics and people with professional experience in other cultural industries, such as museums. Membership is for a limited period of three years. The company's dramaturge and facilitator of the Artistic Counsel explained that this is 'because it's great to be able to have the deeper conversations' but the experience of people relatively new to the theatre was also important. Counsel members are invited to come to a performance of each show on the company's program and give written feedback about 'the whole experience': 'everything from when you walk into the foyer, to whether the food is affordable, to the show itself'. In addition, the Counsel also meets twice a year to give verbal feedback on the company's program, often in response to a written prompt. Counsel members are asked to respond candidly.

Systems of deep feedback are appropriate for collecting information about the quality of the audience experience in relation to the Index. As an example, a representative of the contemporary theatre company's Artistic Counsel gave an indication of the kind of feedback he gave about a range of topics, from the fact that the company employed its own hospitality staff 'so that you can have an engaged conversation when you're buying a drink about the latest show' to 'the way they stagger their times for the different theatres so there's always a buzz and it creates a sense of community in the foyer'. These examples of feedback he provides immediately indicate the sensitivity of deep feedback systems to the indicators, in this case to the sense of collective engagement.

What is apparent from the use of feedback systems at the theatre companies and performing arts venue is that the priority each company gives to each of the four indicators of the audience experience varies. For instance, the children's theatre company gives a high priority to managing risk and maximising authenticity. The need to appeal to audience 'gatekeepers' — parents and teachers — makes risk management for children's theatre particularly important, but the company does not wish to "sanitise" the productions. Instead, post-show forums are used to 'unpack issues that might have been raised in the production [and] young people have a chance to ask questions and that can be as much not just about content but about theatrical form'. For the contemporary theatre company, the issue of authenticity is central to the company's mission and drives much of the feedback that the Artistic Counsel gives. Both written and oral feedback centre on what kinds of work the company should be producing, and whether it is fulfilling its purpose to be contemporary and responsive to change. For the performing arts venue, the highest priority was collective engagement. The deep feedback system that the venue is developing—the 'Theatre Club'—has collective engagement as its primary purpose. Indeed, the club's original aim was to provide a social forum for theatre-goers: 'people don't necessarily like going to theatre on their own. This

builds them a network outside of theatre as well. Just the sort of thing you want to be able to share at the end of the day, isn't it?'

### **Deep Feedback**

Of the case study organisations, the most well-established example of a deep feedback system is the contemporary theatre company's artistic counsel. The term 'counsel' (not council) is used by the company to connote the giving of advice through consultation. The kind of feedback the counsel provides has several levels. On one level, it simply provides a check that the company's program matches the interests of its audience. While stressing that the artistic counsel's advice does not determine the overall program, the company's dramaturge commented that through the counsel's feedback: 'We see how sometimes shows that captivate *us*, because they are about the nature of theatre, aren't necessarily going to do that to an audience member' (emphasis added). The counsel also provides feedback about the effect of the overall program. One year the counsel pointed out the detrimental outcome of having a series of 'dark, depressing shows' scheduled over winter. On specific occasions, the counsel has also drawn attention to a lack of authenticity when, for example, a production does not meet the expectations set out by marketing material. Counsel members also provide feedback based on their specific interests or expertise, such as on the value of the company's website in providing information, or whether the venue successfully encourages the audience to 'linger' after a performance.

We would avoid prescribing exactly the form a deep feedback system must take, due to wide diversity in the goals of each company, and the characteristics of its audience. However, it is possible to identify a range of features that make deep feedback systems effective. The first and most significant of these is that the system should facilitate dialogue. The meetings of the Theatre Club, the discussions taking place on the children's theatre blog site, and the biannual meetings of the Artistic Counsel each allow for staff to probe beyond the participants' initial responses to a performing arts experience through dialogue. The general manager of the children's theatre company explained the need to have 'a dialogue [so] that the perspectives and interests and experiences of young people inspire the artists that work here to think about theatrical form, to think about how theatre is relevant, how it's exciting, where it might be heading'. Much of the success of a deep feedback system is that it captures the kind of information that is often given willingly and unselfconsciously in spontaneous and unsolicited feedback. The General Manager from the children's theatre company described their motivation for creating a blog: 'there's a lot of discussion that takes place in the foyer after the show and you never really hear any of that again. There's no record of what people

thought of it and we hope that there may be a way that [the blog] becomes a space for dialogue’.

Such dialogue need not necessarily be verbal, but rather should take a form appropriate to the company’s existing or target audience. The contemporary theatre company selects members of its artistic counsel on the basis that they are well-educated and have a high degree of access to cultural capital and its use of written reflections on productions reflects these skills. In contrast, the children’s theatre company’s use of play activities on its website – such as an invitation to children to draw their version of a character featured in a play – is a strategy tailored to the skills and interests of its target audience. It is also a forum whereby children are less likely to self-censor according to what they know to be the expectations of their adult theatre companions (such as teachers and parents), which they may do in a live after-show forum. Furthermore, the lack of an immediate time limit on children’s responses is regarded as important at the company. A staff member commented that in a post-show forum, ‘the level of questioning or discussion can’t be as deep as you want it to be and follow-up is best a week after the show’.

A further feature of deep feedback systems is that they can include convivial or social events: the Theatre Club and Artistic Counsel meet over food and drink while the children’s theatre company’s website includes game or activity to encourage children’s participation. In all of the interviews with the organisers and participants of deep feedback initiatives, the interviewees commented on the pleasure involved in participation. The deep feedback system heightens and extends its participants’ experience of the show, and by doing so makes it possible to capture data about this experience. As Reason’s research on the audience’s experience of ‘liveness’ showed, the use of focus groups to gather data heightened the experience ‘by the process of putting that experience into language’ (2004). In a similar way, members of the contemporary theatre company’s artistic counsel acknowledged their enjoyment in providing critical feedback to the company, resulting from the opportunity for reflection.

A final feature is the seriousness with which the deep feedback provided is taken by the company. In contrast to the dance company’s marketing surveys which were not read by the artistic director, at the contemporary theatre company the written responses of the Artistic Counsel are sent to all staff in the company. A representative of the Counsel explained how: ‘I’ll turn up and people I hardly know come up to me and say “Now, you said this ... now why did you think that?” [I]t shows the commitment to the role of the feedback that’s incredibly commendable’. Finally, in the case of the Artistic Counsel, the company regards the encouragement of frankness on the part of the Counsel members as important to its success. Indeed, a Counsel member reported that she believed she had been chosen and asked to continue after two years because of her willingness to provide candid feedback. The

gathering of information through such deep feedback mechanisms does not necessarily lead directly to changes in company programming. However, in the cases investigated here, deep feedback allows the companies to bring audiences into the creative thinking around the production of quality experiences.

### **Conclusion**

Measurement of the audience's sense of authentic experience, collective engagement, risk and knowledge requires feedback that is qualitative and thorough, and that encourages sustained reflection. The features of such deep feedback are comparable to those of reflective or 'deep' learning in education theory. Whereas 'surface learning' is 'associated with uncritical accumulation of facts and opinions' (Bourner, 2003, p. 271), 'deep learning' involves 'interrogating experience with searching questions' (Bourner, 2003, p. 270). Just as both kinds of learning are necessary for successful education (Watkins and Biggs, 1999, p. 35), both 'surface' feedback (in the form of marketing and demographic surveys) and deep feedback are valuable for the performing arts company: surface feedback provides information about the audience whilst deep feedback provides information about their expectations and experience of the performance. Methods for soliciting deep feedback should vary from one company to another, depending on the target audience, company mission, and the status of each of the four quality indicators in relation to this mission. However, a customised deep feedback system will invite audience members to respond to searching and cumulative questions. The company's commitment to gathering and using this information will empower audiences to express the quality of their experience.

Conventional marketing discourse uses the notion of service quality as a tool for measuring levels of satisfaction (Conchar et al, 2004; Grayson and Martinec, 2004) but it does not measure audience experience (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1983; Kotler and Scheff, 1997; Radbourne, 2007; Ragsdale, 2008). This paper argued that the most effective systems by which companies access deep audience feedback are those that access data on the four quality indicators of the Arts Audience Experience Index. The use of the AAEI requires the company to exhibit risk, vision, audience engagement and empowerment. It is at once a radical shift in quality measurement, and at the same time a most logical step in using audience feedback and acknowledging the new role of the audience as co-producer and investor in the performing arts company.

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