

Aligning Practice with Complexity

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This is part of the research informing the report entitled: " Invite | Affirm | Evoke | Unleash: How artistic and cultural processes transform complex challenges." This research was proposed by the [Community Arts Network](#) (affiliated with the [Porticus Foundation](#)) and carried out and written by [IMPACT: Imagining Together Platform for Arts, Culture, and Conflict Transformation](#).

“Art invites us to embrace multiple perspectives. Art can carry diverse perspectives (multiple truths) simultaneously without having to resolve them.” (H. Britt, personal communication, February 24, 2021).

In complexity, “...there is both uncertainty, even among experts, about ‘best practices’ and little agreement among stakeholders about how the end results should look” (Baumgardner-Zuzik et al., 2018). Expressing, acknowledging, and/or honoring multiple perspectives or truths is a key to engaging with complex systems. Engaging with multiple perspectives is a way to probe a system with more honesty than one can do by looking for one simple truth to move forward with. It can honor differing experiences, expertise, and ways of knowing while avoiding the trap of prescribing one logical, linear path forward.

Pain and healing, which are interwoven in recovering from the impacts of global challenges, are not processes that follow logical, linear pathways. Paths to recovering from deep, ongoing violence are often punctuated by people saying “I can feel again” or “I feel like a person again” – and rejoining the vibrations of life, as Lederach mentions (C. Cohen et al., personal communication, January 28, 2021). Holistic goals for working with the roots of complex aspects of global challenges may turn to goals that are less concrete, like returning to the senses, to humanity, and to the interconnectedness of the universe. Such rich goals – which deal with broad systems and include no ‘best practice’ path – can find valuable contribution from arts and cultural practices. At the same time, these holistic goals do not often align with the narrow categories of funding portfolios and traditional aid strategies (e.g., economics, health, violence reduction, democracy).

Management styles and complexity

“For every complex problem, there is an answer that is clear, simple, and wrong.” (Allen, 2018)

Unfortunately for the arts, culture, and conflict transformation (ACCT) ecosystem and for anyone else working primarily with aspects of complexity, the foundations of most funding entities and bureaucratic systems sit squarely in results-based management. **Results-based management is aligned with linear thinking, cause-and-effect centered theories of change, pursuing value for money, and predicting and analyzing results in ways that attempt to attribute them to only their projects** (Baumgardner-Zuzik et al., 2018). This framing can easily ignore outside factors, context, relationships, and the unintended (positive and negative) consequences that arise from projects. Paying attention to such factors is an important way to work in alignment with complexity.

One of my favorite metaphors, which I learned from Heather Britt, is that of building a train track vs steering a ship. When building a train, there is a clear starting point and end goal (the two stations). How to build the tracks and run the train are, at this point in our history with trains, technically complicated (i.e., requiring expertise) at most. Where to place the tracks may have some socially complicated elements (i.e., engaging thoughtfully and sensitively with stakeholders) if it will have to run through existing neighborhoods. There are not many aspects of complexity in this scenario and so attaching a logical, linear flow of how to take on the project, accounting for the resources it will need, and predicting the outcomes is rather straightforward. Building a train track is a great place to use results-based management.

Since unpredictability is a key aspect of complexity, there are no clear blueprints for how to move forward that can be developed ahead of time (Allana, 2014). This produces tensions with **existing systems and dominant work cultures in the aid industry, which focus heavily on results, control, and logic – goals much better suited toward problems that do not have many aspects of complexity.** Practically, this looks like those with more access to financial resources asking for detailed accounts of project logic, privileging projects that ‘demonstrate impact’, and investing less in building the trust needed to loosen that control and move toward effective co-creation.

Back to the metaphor: this time likening steering a ship to working in alignment with aspects of complexity. Like building a train, there is usually a clear starting point and end goal (the two ports the ship is navigating between). The uncertainty arises when trying to chart what path the ship will take to get where it is going; it could take an infinite number of different routes. There are many contextual elements that will impact the course and that are unpredictable and only fully understandable in retrospect: currents, wind, weather, even sea animals interacting with the boat. This means that the crew must be adept at looking for and recognizing these elements and in trusting and communicating adeptly to make necessary shifts. It can be difficult to predict the right amount of provisions or the sturdiness vs weight of the ship that will be needed to adapt to what comes. This is the realm of adaptive management, where the processes needed to steer the ship are more important than knowing the exact outcome or path the ship will take and sticking to a pre-made plan no matter what arises along the way.

As aid systems continue engaging with complex challenges where results-based management works minimally, adaptive management has emerged as an alternative more suited to aspects of complexity. Adaptive management focuses on experimentation, reading contextual factors carefully, and using knowledge that arises to change strategies and activities (Allana, 2014). **To practice adaptive management effectively in a world built on results-based management, many cultural changes are needed: building more trust and more open, honest lines of communication between everyone involved (including funders and funding recipients); loosening grips on tight timelines and rigid budgets; and making more space for thoughtful shifts in strategy and organizational structure** (Forsyth Queen, 2018).

Changing practice

Over the past 10 years or so, language about complexity has become more common in the aid industry. **The global COVID-19 pandemic showed everyone firsthand just how unpredictable and complex our world really is** and how we need to be able to adapt. **Meanwhile, it is still a challenge to internalize what needs to change throughout the aid system to support working in alignment with complexity and adaptation. The willingness to make substantive changes can be hard to find or slow to grow in organizations, especially in the places where power is most concentrated (like boards of foundations and NGOs).** Many do see that the approaches that have been used for years – those more suited to problems that are not complex - are not significantly shifting the systemic challenges we face. The response to this is all too often to ask for more control and proof in terms of proposed solutions, rather than learning to let go and dance with complexity more effectively.

While the arts can be powerful ‘tools’ that arts and cultural experts can wield to draw attention to and carry diverse perspectives (and to amplify often-marginalized ones) – this is perhaps most helpful when

engaging in less complex sub-elements of larger complex global challenges (i.e., when the main challenge is that stakeholders hold varied perspectives on a problem). This kind of engagement, which is often critiqued by artists as over-instrumentalization, may feel more comfortable for the aid industry in its current state. Uplifting a few examples of ‘using’ the arts in effective, values-grounded ways to address complex global challenges could help bridge the gap toward fully investing in the artistic freedom that is most helpful and needed when working in complexity. Artists may be rightfully skeptical, though, of the ways that instrumentalizing the arts can diminish their full potential by attempting to exert additional control. Additionally, working in this way could also over-privilege expertise (often thought of as artistic acclaim or fame) and this is not always helpful, and sometimes even harmful, in community settings.

There can be a spoken or unspoken misconception that operating adaptively or in alignment with complexity means you do not understand what’s going on or that you don’t want to be held accountable for what emerges. This speaks to a clear need for certain skills to navigate complexity effectively, like having a strong grounding in ethics and values and building relationships effectively, even across difference. These skills will help those working with aspects of complexity to not get blown off course once they have seen that the weather looks good enough to take the journey.

“It’s not about thinking that conflict is happening, and artists arrive. In this case, there is a flow of artwork happening and the conflict event interrupts it and opportunities crop up to bring the two together.” - James Thompson (C. Cohen et al., personal communication, January 28, 2021).

The arts play an important role before, after, and outside of ‘solving’ challenges like outbreaks of violence. **Creative and artistic processes have better chances of flourishing in relationship with complex challenges if they were cultivated and practiced all along** and seize an opportunity to creatively address complex challenges. Once an opportunity arises, another key skill involves **investing more energy in the process than on the product and outcome**. Having solid processes can make needed space for sensing what is happening along the way and then on reflecting, finding patterns, and adapting accordingly. These skills help make an artist or cultural worker successful when working on conflict transformation and other complex challenges.

There is a nuance and creativity that is difficult to articulate and that is present before an artistic engagement starts, as its process unfolds, and as those involved invite others in to reflect on the art. Systems rooted in results-based management often de-emphasize this preparation and process in favor of having outputs, outcomes, and attractively packaged products that ‘show’ impact at a defined endpoint. As Carole Kane said, **engaging with the arts can sometimes over-emphasize the finished piece and what the funder wants to see in a brochure, when the real progress happens in the alternative worlding happening along the way and behind the scenes** (C. Cohen et al., personal communication, January 28, 2021).

As Cynthia Cohen and Carole Kane pointed out in conversation, **strengthening the capacity to imagine** can help an artist working on complex aspects of global challenges see when an opportunity emerges. Then, in this serendipitous moment, the intimacy with the creative process guides the artist in knowing how they want to experiment (C. Cohen et al., personal communication, January 28, 2021). This seems akin to – as laid out in the Cynefin framework below – **engaging with many perspectives and looking for patterns that would be helpful to amplify, disrupt, or seed anew**. This also points to how one working in alignment with complexity is better attuned to context and that accountability

is still strong – yet perhaps more focused on creative, relationship-oriented, and sense-making processes rather than the outcome.

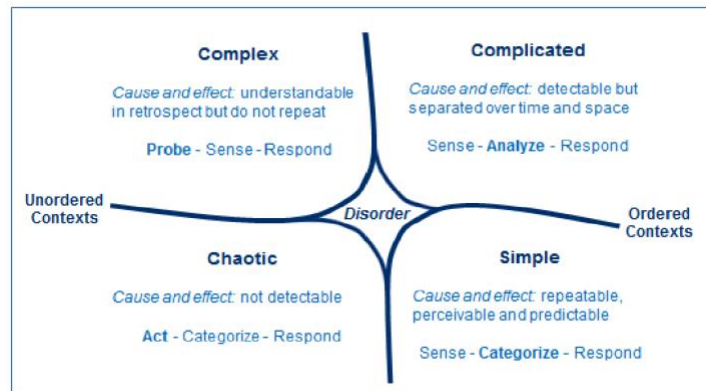
A way for funding entities to align with this process of creative exploration better would be to **resource strong creative processes without requiring much in the way of a predetermined set of intermediary or even end goals**. There may be pockets within funding entities that see the need to work in this way and invest in such processes; the key can come when these pockets interact with the more traditionally rooted systems and bodies within those same entities.

With a shift in focus to processes that support a journey out of numbness and back to humanity and connection with humans, other beings, and the universe, there can also be an unlocking of numbed capacities among those most negatively impacted by global challenges. This has the potential to **support a reclaiming of agency that enables people and communities to care for their own needs while disrupting common narratives – spoken and unspoken – around the helplessness of ‘beneficiaries’ of aid**. Disrupting this narrative may prove quite dangerous to dominant ideologies steeped in saviorism and colonialism that still underpin the aid industry.

On the other hand, John Paul Lederach notes that these processes of unfolding, unknowing, and untethering from common aid paradigms can **spark the freedom that comes when you realize you don’t control anything and a wholeness that focuses beyond product and effectiveness** (C. Cohen et al., personal communication, January 28, 2021). If those with more access to financial resources (including but not limited to funders or certain groups within funding bodies) could move away from fear of losing control and instead learn the joy of dancing with complex challenges, needed space could open for emergence, valuing relationships, and building skills without having to know exactly how they will be used. This would all be beneficial to the arts and cultural practices, as well as other complexity-aligned ways of engaging, enabling their full power to flourish as they engage with the complex aspects of global challenges.

Appendix: note on complexity

One concept that helps unpack what aspects of complexity mean is the Cynefin framework. This framework was designed to support sense-making and decision-making, particularly among collectives trying to better understand problems (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003).



[graphic from (USAID, 2018)]

In terms of this memo, the most important places to focus are the complicated and complex quadrants. In the complicated quadrant, stable cause and effect relationships exist but take more time or particular resources or expertise to understand. When working with complicated elements, assumptions need to be challenged and organizations that center around learning, adaptation, and are grounded in systems theory are most helpful.

In the complex quadrant, cause and effect relationships exist but defy even expert analysis and categorization; patterns emerge in retrospect only and may not repeat. A key to working in complexity is engaging with multiple perspectives to sense patterns then to amplify desirable ones, disrupt undesirable ones, or seed new ones (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003). [Note: this article uses the term ‘knowable’ rather than complicated]

One relevant implication that both these frameworks bring is that likely all the global challenges we are exploring have elements that are simple, complicated, complex, and chaotic. **When we say that the arts are particularly suited to address complexity, we could bring more nuance by making it clear that not all parts of addressing legacies of violence or climate change (etc.) are actually complex.** This makes room for not elevating the arts above other approaches to addressing these challenges, instead saying there’s room for many approaches – just that many of the more traditional, widely-used approaches may be more suited to the simple and complicated elements of these challenges. We may even attempt to show an example of our perspectives on the simple, complicated, complex, and chaotic elements in one challenge to walk through this point. The paper by USAID does this with the example of vaccinations. There may also be an important case to make about how the arts and culture can engage constructively with both complicated and complex elements that are nested within in the writ-large complex challenges.

Author’s Biography

Emily Forsyth Queen is an independent consultant specializing in collaboratively designing and facilitating creative, emotionally-grounded learning and design processes aimed at creating a more just, equitable, and peaceful world. With over 10 years of experience in monitoring, evaluation, research, and learning, Emily is dedicated to sparking radically inclusive, trauma-aware transformation, adaptation, and innovation. Within donor organizations like USAID and peacebuilding organizations like the Alliance for Peacebuilding, she has driven action research on using participatory evaluation approaches grounded in systems thinking within complex environments. Emily is a cellist who holds a B.S. in Music and Psychology from the University of Mary Washington, an M.A. in Conflict Transformation, and an M.A. in Sustainable International Development from the Heller School for Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University. Emily is determined to become the best ancestor she can be and is committed to ongoing self-reflection and growth and to accompanying others along similar paths. Emily is a member of IMPACT Leadership Circle.

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