



## The Case Approach:

Arts organisations are finding new ways to achieve social impact through an innovative approach – the 'CASE' approach

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## About the author

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Rishi Coupland is an audience expert with over fifteen years experience in delivering research and strategic programmes, spanning Commercial and Third Sector industries. He is currently Head of Data Intelligence at the National Theatre, where he leads the newly-formed Data Studio. Prior to this, he held the roles of Head of Audience Strategy (National Theatre), Marketing Services Manager (Southbank Centre), and Creative Producer (Buzz-erk Productions). Rishi began his career as an engineer with companies including British Airways and Kimberly-Clark, in locations across the UK and Europe. In 2017 Rishi was awarded a Clore Fellowship, and is currently an elected board member of the Arts Marketing Association.

Innovation has, for some time, been associated with the arts sector in the UK. This was acknowledged in the 2018 report by NESTA, entitled *Experimental Culture*: “UK arts and cultural organisations, and the artists and practitioners that work in and around them, have a reputation for producing bold, exciting and often highly innovative work.”

Despite this acknowledged track record in innovation and experimentation, there have been drivers for cultural institutions and artists to ‘up their game’ further, particularly around 2008 with the publication of The McMaster Report. In 2009, things developed further when NESTA enabled the better monitoring of innovation, by creating a working definition of innovation categories: “There are four categories of innovation common to cultural institutions. These are innovation in: audience reach, art form development, value creation, and business management and governance.”

Arguably, since then the arts sector has increased innovation within all the categories defined by NESTA. The 2012 Olympics opening ceremony and the poppies installation at the Tower of London are notable examples of art form innovation. ‘Audience reach’ innovation has resulted in increased theatre and opera audiences through cinema streaming. The BFI media player is an example of innovation in the area of value creation. And across all areas of the arts, we have, in recent years, seen the emergence of the social enterprise model, bringing new ideas of business management and governance.

However I argue that there is an undervalued, new and separate category of innovative projects that has become more visible in recent years, in response to societal and funding changes. In these projects, artists and institutions break their established creative processes in order to work with under-represented voices in society to create new, often disruptive projects. I call these CASE projects, as they have four key elements. CASE projects are always:

Co-created with under-represented people,  
Artist-enabled,  
Socially impactful and  
Experimental

Recent examples of projects and initiatives that I would fit under the category of CASE include the worldwide Science Gallery network, the Idea Stores in Tower Hamlets, Grayson Perry’s *The Vanity of Small Differences*, and the Galway Hospital project *The Magician and the Swallow’s Tale*. Additionally, recent Arts Council England (ACE) funded projects Change Makers and Creative People and Places enabled the creation of many of these societally focused projects around the UK.

**Do we need this new name for innovation? What is distinctive about CASE projects?**

It could be argued that we have always had this kind of creative project. Is this just another way of saying ‘Art which has social impact’?

The difference is that CASE projects have a more rigid definition. For example, it is possible to create social impact arts projects without the creative involvement of under-represented people, but CASE projects must have this creative involvement at their very heart. Similarly, social impact projects need not be experimental – they can be about tried-and-tested delivery – whereas CASE projects are always experimental and disruptive by definition. All CASE projects are social impact projects, but not all social impact projects are CASE projects.

Highlighting a key difference, I would argue that CASE projects have a great and unique power of innovation because they have under-represented voices at their creative heart – that is their innovative strength. This can be illustrated with two examples.

Firstly, in 2016, Birmingham Museums used funding from ACE's Change Makers fund to support a placement for curator Sara Wajid. Wajid invited co-curators from under-represented, ethnic minority backgrounds to re-write and create some of the museum's key interpretations, which they did, tackling issues of colonialism within the museum collection head-on. Not only did this result in creative disruption at the heart of Birmingham Museum's creative process, it also engaged new audiences. Importantly, this project has led to the creation of an active 'Decolonising the Museum' movement.

A second example is the *Little Inventors* initiative in Sunderland. Artist Dominic Wilcox was asked by Cultural Spring, a creative organisation in Sunderland, to engage with children who were underprivileged in terms of access to creative learning. Funded by Creative People and Places, a scheme was devised where children created their own inventions, and these were then fabricated by local 'makers' and displayed in an exhibition. Although Wilcox is himself an inventor, in this project he was simply an enabler for the children's own creativity. The initiative was widely publicised by the global media and as a result, schoolchildren in South Korea have started uploading their own creations to the website, driven by their own initiative.

It's interesting to note that for both these projects to happen, it was necessary for a totally new commissioning process to be created. CASE projects have a tendency to be disruptive, which is key to their power to create innovation.

### How does CASE innovation compare to other kinds of innovation?

The four categories of innovation identified by NESTA are audience reach, art form development, value creation, and business management and governance. The distinctive feature of CASE initiatives is that they always drive innovation in both audience reach and art form development at the same time - hand in hand. If arts leaders are looking simply to innovate around the way that they expand audience reach, without wanting to disrupt their creative process, then using the CASE approach may not be the best fit. On the other hand, if traditional audience reach methods have failed in a particular area, and it is time to try being more disruptive,

than the CASE approach could yield powerful results. CASE innovation is therefore a subset of the existing types of innovation, with a unique and powerful usefulness.

### What is the distinctive value of the CASE approach?

It can be seen that CASE projects, when successful, attract significant audiences. For example *Little Inventors* drew a large global audience through media coverage and the internet, and the Idea Stores in London serve thousands of people daily. However, there are other, less disruptive and time consuming ways to draw audiences, so why should arts leaders use this new approach?

I believe that when leaders invest in using a CASE approach, it helps make them more resilient in the contemporary world. More specifically it helps them adapt to an *ambiguous* world. In this context 'ambiguous world' means one that is full of problems which are hard to predict, prepare for, or navigate. The term was coined by the American Military in the 1990s to reflect the post-Cold War landscape. 'Ambiguous' may have been used to describe the new geopolitical order, but it works for the arts sector, today, just as well.

Here's a list of recent high-impact, ambiguous events: Brexit, the #MeToo movement, the financial crash, the diversity and inclusion movement, decline in arts provision within schools, explosion in digital media consumption, and the rapid economic decline of British towns. These were all unpredictable events that have already affected the arts sector greatly, and may continue to do so further.

Arts leaders need to not only survive in this environment, but also to thrive and to reach out. In a 2018 article in *The Guardian*, Nicholas Serota, chair of ACE, called for the arts sector to take an active role in healing what he referred to as our 'divided society'. Within the article he stated: "...at a time when the cohesion of society is threatened by visible inequalities in wealth, housing, health and education, the arts provide a place where ideas can be debated, explored and developed and new propositions can be put forward."

Given these challenges, perhaps adopting a CASE approach might assist arts leaders in engaging with an ambiguous, divided society. This approach allows us to turn leadership on its head. Instead of an Artistic Director needing to find complex answers for distant stakeholders, this same arts leader might reach out to those people and ask "What do you want from the arts? Can you make it for yourselves, with our help?"

For leaders in the arts sector, the benefits of allowing diverse voices is particularly important, as the work of academics O'Brien and Taylor has demonstrated that leaders of arts institutions are generally unrepresentative of the population, and largely unaware of their own privilege. In addition the *Taking Part* survey has shown that arts audiences are also unrepresentative. In summary, by using a more inclusive approach, arts leaders can better navigate a changing and divided society by using diverse voices, and people with lived experience, to drive innovative society-focused projects.



## Why is it important to focus on the development of CASE projects?

If CASE initiatives are increasingly prevalent, and have distinctive value to society and to arts leaders, then surely they will thrive and become naturally part of the arts sector? Perhaps not without support. Funding is in decline or under threat. The Change Makers fund is now closed, and Creative People and Places funding is not assured for the long term, with existing partners needing to manage lower budgets. Local authorities, which are often key supporters of social impact initiatives, are themselves cutting arts budgets or holding them at standstill.

In addition, cultural institutions may need nudging to support the CASE approach, which often cuts across the creative vision of arts organisations. CASE projects need to continue to be supported so that the sector can continue to learn from them.

## How can we take the CASE approach forward?

A clear way to take the CASE approach forward is to increase funding, especially reinstating the Change Makers funding. However, there are two ways in which the approach could become more widely accessible without the need for additional funding.

The first of these is through diverting some ring-fenced digital funding, and the second is through more widespread adoption of 'design thinking' principles into mainstream arts practice. 'Design thinking' is an approach to innovation which shares several features with CASE innovation. For example, it is focused on the needs of the end user, not the desires of the creative. Secondly, the design thinking process asks innovators to consider the viewpoints of 'extreme users'. This is similar to the CASE approach of including under-represented voices. The NESTA *Experimental Culture* report predicts more widespread use of design thinking within the arts in the next ten years, and this may open up the sector to consider a CASE approach.

Digital funding has been a significant focus for ACE in recent years. In the latest ACE report, the word 'digital' appears 27 times, almost as many times as the word 'children' (28). In terms of funding, The Space (a digital platform supported by ACE) received almost £16m of funding from 2014-18. Despite this, a recent survey of arts organisations found that many had invested productively in digital technology, but also that there was a "lack of reported growth in digital skills". The study also found that there was a fall in organisations experimenting with digital technology.

Perhaps it is time to move some of the funding from being explicitly digital-focused and divert some of it funding innovation around the area of social impact. Many CASE initiatives have significant digital components, and this may in fact unlock a new way for cultural institutions and artists to engage with digital innovation in a targeted way.

## Conclusion

CASE is a newly visible and distinctive type of innovation which, when used by cultural organisations, allows them to more effectively engage with a divided and ambiguous society. Cultural leaders can increase their resilience by engaging with

CASE projects. The CASE approach should be supported both financially and through leadership choices, to become better understood and more widely adopted.



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