

Project observation methods

We frequently extol the virtues of having an evaluation process in place *before* the end of the project. One of the benefits is that you can better plan to [keep track of numbers](#), or measure 'before' and 'after' impact. But it may also be useful to factor in some observation of a live project still in progress.

Consider a project that hopes to gather new audiences or communities, and develop some kind of social benefit as a result. Having data on the numbers of people who attended, or where they live, is helpful to an extent but it doesn't necessarily capture the value of the event or the narratives of change. Maybe people came along expecting it to be one kind of event but were then disappointed by what they found - do the numbers alone capture that experience? Therefore it is sometimes useful for researchers to factor in this method of 'live observation'.

Ask the host to introduce you.

Depending on the type of event, the people running it may need to introduce you to those attending in different ways. If it is public-facing, they might simply mention in their general introduction that you're there evaluating the project. In something more private like a workshop, you might need written consent from each participant. However they do it, it will buy in goodwill from those present and they'll let you get on with your job without feeling awkward.

Observe, but try not to meddle.

Don't mess up the project you're evaluating so that you're affecting what happens there. Don't put people off so they can't take part, or draw too much of their attention.

Observe objectively, do not participate too much.

In [ethnographic research methods](#) we sometimes talk about 'participant observation', a process whereby the researcher might participate in the space or activity, and we draw on this experience. This leaning towards participation is not so appropriate for *evaluative* work, where we are more interested in the participants' experiences.

Use live observation as one of multiple methods

This can be the descriptive colour to the rest of your methods, alongside surveys, interviews, and audience figures. What you see at the event can provide wonderful illustrative examples of the points you are making. But don't use it as the only method, as you are only experiencing one event of the project that doesn't necessarily get to the 'backstage' accounts that interviews can.

Take notes, discreetly.

Clattering away at your laptop keyboard in an otherwise silent room can draw unnecessary attention to yourself. A pen and notebook might be more appropriate.

