

Teaching curatorial decision-making with the *Inner Impresario*

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Author Note

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The selection of artistic and cultural programs to offer to audiences is central to organizational identity, mission, and business model for most producing and presenting arts organizations; it is how they accomplish mission, satisfy customers, and remain economically viable. Because arts and culture organizations of diverse aesthetic preferences have annual/seasonal patterns, artistic programs in the present result from curatorial choices made in the past, specifically of which artistic offerings will audiences experience. For example, symphonies commission orchestral compositions – from which composers? Museums plan exhibitions – from which artists? Theatre season directors select repertoire, publishers select authors ...And so on. The implementation of those decisions is central to the business model of serving audiences, and generating sustainable financial flows. Each artistic discipline is unique, yet across disciplines and genres, artistic programming shares some common elements of curatorial selection.

This teaching note addresses how to simulate that curatorial programming process in arts management education. It has been an element of Business 311 “Arts Administration” at Muhlenberg College, in Allentown, Pennsylvania. Typical students are upper-level undergraduates with double majors combining Business with Theatre, Dance or Music, and strong awareness of the arts in New York, Philadelphia, and other metropolitan areas. The desired learning outcomes are to:

- Recognize artistic programming as an envisioning and decision-making process
- Articulate and specify preference criteria used in artistic programming
- Examine the tradeoffs between criteria and constraints in artistic programming

Theoretical Rationale

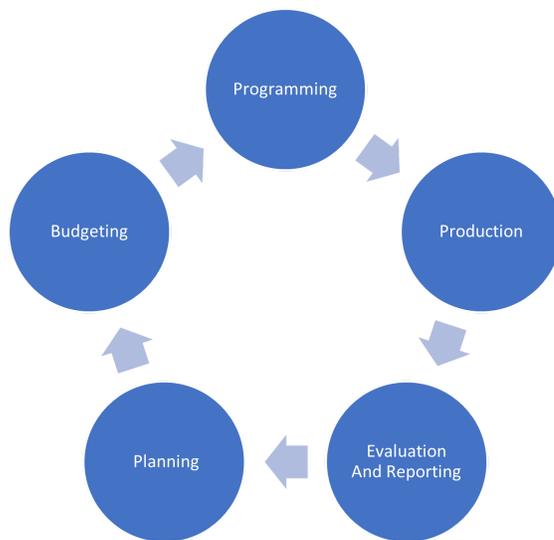
Pedagogical, disciplinary, and practitioner considerations factor into this approach. As an educator, I draw on scholarly and practitioner perspectives in management and economics to ground learning. Based in economics and management, my scholarship generally addresses strategic management and decision-making in the arts and other arenas. In earlier career phases, I had multi-year artistic programming responsibilities and accountability in public radio, concert promotions, artist representation, recording production, and community festivals. In these organizations, curatorial programming was integral to those organizations' arts activities, and was subject to evaluation and accountability. In a specialty music radio show, programming entails selecting the next set of recordings. A weekly campus concert pub venue required selecting performers suitable for the venue and market. The largest scale program I ever managed was programming over 100 artists each year in a festival of nine days on eight stages, with performances 11 hours a day. (Parks 2018).¹ These programs included many artists, but did not present all who were available.

In these organizations, future programs were influenced by past results. For long-lived arts organizations' artistic programs, the context for programming is recurring activities: planning, budgeting, programming, production, and evaluation, as shown in Figure 1. Programming decisions necessarily precede production, and are followed by (retrospective) evaluation and more (forward) planning and budgeting. Consequently, programming is a scenario activity, envisioning a future audience experiencing an artistic offering. Artistic programmers maximize the quality of that desired experience, selecting "the best" artistic offerings available for the future within budgeted resources, and not selecting others.

¹ CKCU-FM, Rooster's at Carleton University, Silver Ring concerts (Ottawa, Canada), and Bethlehem Musikfest, Rose Garden Children's Festival, and WDIY-FM (Bethlehem, USA).

Figure 1

Stages in recurring arts production/presenting cycles



Artistic programming creates rich opportunities to expand students' discourse of practice in arts management (DeVeraux, 2009) using managerial economics. My classroom discourse addresses how programming uses management methods of planning, organizing, leading, and controlling. Strategically, it calls for vision, imagination, judgment, scenario planning, risk assessment, and knowledge of financial and market constraints. The arts are inspiring, so artistic decision-making engages aesthetics, affect, and passion. Programming is positioned astride intersecting cognitive, interpersonal, cultural, institutional, aesthetic, and moral domains. Economically, programs generate revenue and incur costs. In arts organizations, programming is subject to accountability and evaluation. Within these contexts, artistic programming uses computational and heuristic methods. There is much for students to learn.

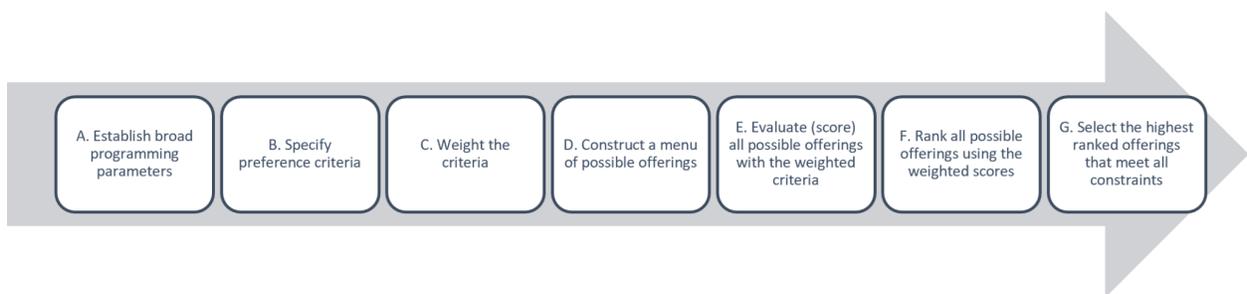
Some arts management textbooks address artistic programming as strategy or structure, without fully examining its process. Byrnes (2015) describes programming within planning. Rosewall (2014) cites “mission-based program planning.” To Varbanova (2015), programming is the product “P” in a 4-P marketing mix. Snider (2021) is more specific about programming criteria and their interactions. Korza et. al. (2016) offer a decision sequence involving values and philosophy, desired impact, stakeholders, criteria, feasibility, and assessment. Rhine (2018) is also explicit regarding menus, criteria, and weights.

Activities

To build student capacity in decision-making and planning, I encourage them to approach programming via a problem-solving routine: given a programming challenge, they should identify decision criteria, assign weights summing to 100%, identify possible solutions, score possibilities using the criteria, apply the weights to the scores to generate a ranked list of artistic offerings, and present the list as a plan. Figure 2 illustrates the programming sequence.

Figure 2

Stages in the programming process



The *Inner Impresario* builds on analytic methods that business students have already seen: constrained optimization, weighted average decision-making, and probabilistic payoff estimates of different future scenarios. While they have not all internalized these as computational tools, they have intrinsic awareness of statistical distribution and variance, which can be enhanced in naturalistic settings (Mazen, 2008). The simulation requires both analytic and creative processes, as Cameron and Whetten (2011) recommend supplementary creative techniques like improving problem definition, generating multiple alternatives, to support analytic methods.

The simulation is part of a multi-class module on artistic programming including readings, empirical observation, and discussion. Relevant readings by this point in the course include portions of Byrnes (2015), and Caves (2003) regarding properties of creative industries, in particular “nobody knows” what will happen, the “infinite variety” of choices, and vertical differentiation as “A List / B List”. They read Kushner (2003) on intermediary roles, and to recognize programming as constrained optimization. Students also observe contemporaneous and historical programs from arts organizations, booking agency rosters, and arts news. As student artists and audience members, they can envision futures of deep and meaningful cultural experiences with full houses and happy audiences.

The Inner Impresario scaffolds the path to those futures as a cognitive decision-making process. Students design an artistic program in stages as shown in Figure 2. Usually, the activities span three class meetings followed by a written reflection. It can work for individuals or teams, with ongoing class conversation and a deliverable of a proposal to a finance committee. Students’ objective is to plan a program of the best available set of artistic offerings within budget constraints, including:

- Preferred artists and their schedules
- Feasibility within time and space and constraints
- Prospect of success with respect to mission and financial targets

Assessment of student learning incorporates discussion and written reports and reflection on how the underlying decision framework was used to create that program.

Arts management students (and faculty!) commonly have strong feelings for particular artists and genres. Teaching programming as decision-making illuminates the choices and tradeoffs associated with those passions. It embodies elements of critical pedagogy in arts management (Atkins, 2020), giving students voice, requiring their critical thinking, and guiding them to improved understanding. Table 1 has the key simulation instructions and comments for instructors. Additional worksheets, examples, and illustrations are available from the author.

Table 1. Inner Impresario Simulation Student Instructions and Instructor Guidance

As artistic/program director for a presenting organization, you have a responsibility to recommend a program for a six-event season to decision-makers who control the program budget. Your recommendation should explain how you created that plan, following these stages:

Instructions to students	Guidance for instructors
<p>A. Set a broad programming policy of artistic forms, genres or disciplines that 1) fit the organization’s mission, and 2) have a variety of available artistic offerings suitable to facilities, marketplace, calendar, and budget.</p> <p>B. Articulate your preferences by describing how you compare offerings in the genre and/or discipline. Specifically, state five specific and different evaluation criteria for evaluating artistic offerings. Together, they should capture all major elements of what you prefer in artistic offerings. Individually, they distinguish artistic offerings from each other by addressing different elements.</p> <p>C. Assign a weight to each criterion reflecting its relative importance. If they are equal, assign each one a weight of 20%. If not, re-order them from most to least important with different weights. You can use more or fewer than five, as long as the weights total 100%.</p> <p>D. Create a decision menu of 15 or more suitable artistic offerings from which you might consider selecting six.</p> <p>E. Score all offerings on the menu on a scale of 1, 2, or 3 on every criterion, and record it in a table of criteria x offering.</p> <p>F. Cross-multiply score x criterion weight, and sum (stages E and C) to derive an overall rating for all artists on your menu</p>	<p>A. This stage establishes a feasible range for the simulation. The instructor should provide plausible organizational scenarios with strategies, history, mission, and structure, scaled to the learning objectives. Based on my experience, I illustrate with presenting organizations. My students have imagined one- and multi-day festivals, seasons of theater, Broadway, or dance in various genres, and art gallery programming.</p> <p>B. Articulation of criteria is the focus of this stage. This work builds communication skills, and uses artistic and cultural knowledge. Students can enhance their lexicon and rhetoric of what is desirable, and why, and learn to convey these in the informed language of decision-makers. This does not specify which artists are desirable, but rather what makes any artist desirable within the programming range. Five is suggested as a manageable number. Ideally, each criterion describes a different attribute of the offering that varies across a range of artists. It should be in the language of genre or discipline, not generic terms. Ideally, they are measurable and vary across artistic offerings, such as breadth of a discipline or range, artists’ virtuosity or technique, or appeal to a particular segment.</p> <p>C. This stage reinforces the tradeoffs among preferences. With five criteria, the default is 20% each. Students can change weights, or add or reduce criteria to see the marginal impact of diluted or strengthened criteria.</p>

<p>(D). The highest ratings designate your highest ranked artistic offerings across all preference criteria</p> <p>G. Your highest-ranked artistic offering requires 30% of your budget, the next two 25%, the next five 20%, and the rest 12% each. Given that budget, which combination would you select for your program?</p> <p>H. Write a report to a person in the organization with your recommended program along with an explanation of how you came to that recommendation.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">AND/OR</p> <p>I. Write a reflection on your learning from the simulation. How did the recommended seasons satisfy your preferences? If you chose the highest-ranked six, how well would that represent your preferences? What kind of season would it create? What would it take to make it a better season?</p>	<p>D. Stage D reflects market availability of offerings meeting technical needs, and constraints placed on programming. Menu creation requires current market knowledge, and is a de facto form of selection, by creating a meaningful range of choice, e.g., 15 relative to a prospective six-show season. The “feasible range” from stage A defines some thresholds or minimums (e.g., local content or diversity expectations) that define the scope of search for offerings. Instructors can modify it to fit other programming scenarios.</p> <p>E. In Stage E, students apply preference criteria to the menu, scoring possibilities on every preference criterion. Pedagogically, a three-point range is a proxy for more granular scoring, such as five or ten points.</p> <p>F. This stage engages the underlying computation of weights x scores, summed to determine expected value. This can be easily shown in Excel. Ideally, this creates a listing of possible artistic offerings, drawn from a plausible menu, and ranked by accepted criteria.</p> <p>G. The percent-of-budget figures in the exercise require the students to make choices among programs. Note that the constraint is presented as a cost limit; it could equally be presented as a profit floor, which would elevate revenue as a criterion.</p> <p>H. A report approach emphasizes the accountability aspects of the simulation, because programming is most commonly carried within an organization structure.</p> <p>I. A reflection approach reinforces student learning about process, envisioning, and tradeoffs.</p>
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Adapting and evaluating the simulation

The simulation is a stylized view of programming that ignores many real-world conditions. Leaving budget to the end is one; it is usually very present all the way through. But it requires knowledge of prices to be fully implemented into the simulation. Every discipline has its own critical issues and processes; the tangibility and static presentation of an art gallery contrasts with the dynamic service of the performing arts. Yet similar decision processes drive both. Programming is frequently a group activity; the interpersonal judgment issues are not addressed in this note. Instructors using the simulation or its ideas should improvise around the specifics to fit their teaching setting and knowledge.

Student reflections have shown how the *Inner Impresario* simulation supports their development as arts programmers by engaging their entrepreneurial instincts, imagination, and knowledge. It builds heuristic capacity in the regular work of arts programmers: envisioning artistic success, navigating fixed allocations of time, space, and money, confronting ambiguity, conflicts, and changing preferences. The managerial economics perspective reinforces behavioral learning. Students experience the limitations of linear decision processes, such as cognitive limitations and biases. To learn the annual and seasonal cycle, students can compare past forecasts to actual events for tastes, artist life cycles, and organizational factors. In general, articulating, explaining, and communicating their programming values builds skill and agency as successful programmers. Where curatorial artistic programming is central to organizational success, that agency is a path for their broader professional development.

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