

Art-thérapie Transmission culturelle Animation socio-culturelle
Éducation artistique Accompagnement par l'art Médiation culturelle
Médiateur Animateur socio-culturel Art communautaire Médiation
Démocratie culturelle Art-thérapie Interprétation
Appropriation culturelle Participation Inclusion sociale Art-thérapie Médiation artistique
Action culturelle Éducation artistique Médiateur
Médiation artistique Art communautaire Action culturelle Pratiques culturelles Inclusion
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culturelle Animation socio-culturelle Éducation artistique

Cultural Mediation: Questions and Answers

A GUIDE

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What is cultural mediation?

In the constant interaction between art and society, ties among politics, culture, and public space are woven. This process of forging relationships between the cultural and societal spheres is also known as cultural mediation*¹.

In Quebec, the expression is used by a growing number of stakeholders to define approaches to building new connections between people and culture. It is an umbrella term for a wide variety of practices ranging from audience-development activities to participatory and community art*. Government bodies and municipalities are instituting mediation programs aimed at counteracting the cultural exclusion of a large part of the population, at the same time as cultural organizations and artists are finding new ways to encounter and interact with the public.

Today, we speak of a field of cultural action* in which strategies, mechanisms, and tools are created to encourage cultural transmission* to and cultural appropriation* by the public. At the intersection of the cultural and social spheres, cultural mediation practices are embodied in activities and projects that are based on participation* to stimulate encounters among individuals and audiences with diverse experiences. The notion of cultural mediation is advanced as a process of appropriation of meaning through a personal and living relationship between cultural references and individuals. Ultimately, it aims to turn each person – visitor or spectator – into a cultural actor.

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What are the origins of mediation?

From the Latin word *mediatio* – more precisely from the root *med-*, which means “in the middle” – the word “mediation” was coined in the thirteenth century to designate a human intervention between two parties. Mediation is thus a process of conciliation that takes place through an intermediary: the mediator. Although the term has today found a home in practices in the cultural sphere, this is relatively new. Mediation refers more spontaneously to fields such as religion, society, and law.

In a religious context, mediation refers to the establishment of a link between heaven and earth, between humans and the divine. Mediators are therefore intercessors who reveal messages and facilitate an “encounter” with the sacred. In the legal community, mediation refers to the resolution of conflicts between two parties. Here, the mediator is a negotiator and conciliator. Although they are very different, these two first forms of mediation shed light on certain aspects of what we mean by cultural mediation.

The term appeared in the cultural field in France in the 1960s, but it really emerged in the library and museum sectors in the 1980s. Within these environments, traditionally concerned with the transmission of knowledge, learning, and objects, mediation was at first conceived within a classical perspective of the dissemination of art, literature, and heritage.

¹ Terms with asterisks are defined in the *Glossary of Cultural Mediation*.

In Québec, it was not until the 2000s that the expression “cultural mediation” was appropriated by people in the artistic, cultural, and community fields, but then there was explosive growth in initiatives and practices bearing the term.

In the development of cultural policies, in both France and Québec, mediation was initially thought of by decision makers and institutions within the axis of cultural democratization*, around the notions of access and accessibility to artworks and cultural production for as many people as possible.

These cultural action practices gradually evolved toward interventions focusing on cultural democracy*, based on increased participation by individuals and highlighting their personal expression. Why? Notably because it was realized that traditional democratization and audience-development strategies were not bearing fruit, as they were out of touch with a number of sociodemographic realities including immigration, youth, and the impact of the digital environment on cultural participation.

With a growing desire to increase and facilitate individuals’ participation and, especially, artistic expression, cultural stakeholders drew much more directly on their creativity and the valuing of their respective cultural backgrounds. One result was the emergence of collective, participatory creations, community art – a set of manifestations that highlighted the different forms of cultural expression of society as a whole.

Cultural mediation approaches and activities are articulated and reinvented as a function of the diversity and continual updating of cultural practices and tastes, which are often composite on an individual level, going hand in hand with the diversity of lifestyles. Mediation thus evolved as a field of practice at the intersection of the objectives and activities of cultural democracy and cultural democratization.

Actions at the crossroads of the objectives of cultural democracy and cultural democratization

Facilitate access to arts and culture for the greatest number

Explore dissemination processes

Facilitate citizen participation in cultural life

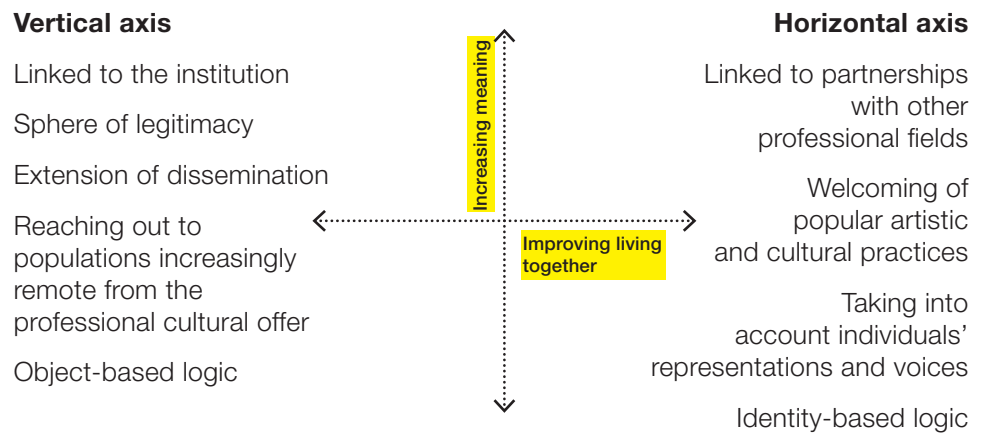
Explore modes of expression

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Transmission Guidance Interpretation Appropriation Creation

This evolution of cultural action, moving from a logic of access to a logic of participation, may be described as moving along two axes:

1. A vertical axis, related to transmission of artworks and productions formulated in the legitimized institutional cultural sphere. Here, through different means of guidance, professional stakeholders attempt to win over parts of the population who are less familiar with their world. In a spirit resembling the objectives of art education*, this axis involves sharing knowledge and awakening individuals' and audiences' capacity for appreciation.
2. A horizontal axis, related to citizens' cultural participation and expression. Here, often in collaboration with other social stakeholders, professionals will formulate inclusive and immersive techniques to encourage active participation by individuals. With objectives resembling those of community education, these actions aim more for citizens' social and cultural inclusion.



Cultural mediation operates in the enduring tension that unites these two axes. On the one side is the sphere of cultural legitimacy and the quality of artworks—a dimension linked to meaning and knowledge. On the other side is the relational work among people and partnerships with other socioeconomic spheres—a dimension that contextualizes art and culture in society.

The evolution of cultural mediation practices has led to major changes in modes of cultural transmission and in social relations. In terms of professional practices, audience relations, and state discourse and action, cultural mediation has acquired a new political and civic reach, characterized by the creation of new networks and spaces for exchange among different actors.

More broadly, cultural mediation falls within a perspective of social transformation, improvement of living conditions for individuals, and community development. In this, the philosophy of action of cultural mediation corresponds to the transversal objectives of Agenda 21 for Culture, which repositions the cultural dimension at the core of social, economic, and environmental development.



Which fields are concerned with mediation?

Cultural mediation practices call upon artists, cultural workers, and workers in social work, healthcare, immigration, education, business, municipalities, and other fields.

While creators and the organizations that represent them or display their works are being asked to take new risks by changing their relationships with publics and individuals, other social actors are also called upon to more broadly integrate the cultural dimension into their field of activity.

Cultural mediation therefore is addressed to all of those who wish to undertake a cultural project that includes citizen participation or to integrate a cultural approach into their actions involving healthcare, social work, education, the environment, and other spheres. Mediation is also addressed directly to members of the general public, who are invited, by participating in a cultural activity, to become full and complete cultural actors.

The growing concern with cultural mediation in public discourse is related to a broader process of territorialization resulting from the decentralization of cultural policies. Municipalities and regional county municipalities (MRCs) are expanding their cultural jurisdictions and formulating policies and action plans. These actions are conveyed by increasing interest in well-thought-out, well-financed cultural mediation practised as a strategy for regional revitalization and social cohesion. This vision is also integrated with the objectives of Agenda 21 for Culture, adopted by the Québec government in September 2011, which aims for integration of culture into sustainable development policies and approaches.



What forms does mediation take?

Cultural mediation actions are thus performed by cultural institutions, artists, and independent cultural workers, as well as actors in the education, social work, and healthcare sectors. Depending on the goals of the project leaders (educational, artistic, economic, community, or other), the actions take different forms, such as:

1. To raise awareness of and contribute to the reception and transmission of artworks:
 - Conversations with the public before and after a show or exhibition
 - Performances in schools
 - Rehearsals open to the public
 - Visits backstage of organizations
 - Actions in public spaces

2. To stimulate and facilitate expression and participation by individuals through cultural mediation:
 - Workshops in targeted milieus (schools, recreational centres, community centres, etc.)
 - Community art projects (shared creations)
 - Collaborations with amateur or semi-professional groups
 - Highlighting of more spontaneous and urban forms
 - Residencies or workshops in schools, community centres, and other unconventional locations

Who are mediators?

Depending on the cultural project, its nature, and its goals, the mediator* may be defined as an informer, a guide, a teacher, or in another role. The mediator's primary function is to encourage liaisons between the cultural object (material production or creative process) and individuals. His or her work will be modulated and redefined to adapt to specific aspects of targeted groups, publics, and individuals, and to the artistic, cultural, and social context within which they fit.

However, the mediation function has expanded beyond fieldwork into the area of management. Projects are becoming more and more complex, as they involve working with other sectors (especially healthcare and social work); this necessitates new methods, increasingly transversal approaches, and great integration into the formulation of activities, resources, and partnerships. No longer is the mediator necessarily an artist or a specialist in an art discipline; he or she must be able to work appropriately with the creative process and cultural objects. An artist may be on the cultural mediation team without necessarily being responsible for the project. And so we are seeing the birth of a new profession.

The main qualities of a mediator may be summarized in terms of “knowing” and “doing”.

- Knowledge (the field)
Have good general knowledge of culture and the cultural field: the players, the institutions, the resources.
- Skills (organization)
Be able to participate in the formulation of the cultural project and, therefore, have some knowledge of management: managing resources, coordinating activities, being able to adapt to emergency and unexpected situations, etc.
- Skills (interpersonal)
Listen to others and show empathy, coordinate a team, work cooperatively, be imaginative and creative, have the soul of a teacher.
- Doing (sharing, learning, transferring knowledge)
Demonstrate by application of a method, a technique, an art form, etc.
- Doing with (support and coaching)
Coach, arouse curiosity and interest, know how to inspire practice rather than guiding.
- Letting them do/monitoring
Make participants autonomous by encouraging them to appropriate the practice and thus, gradually, become empowered.

How is it useful?

The positive effects of cultural participation have been widely documented, both for individuals (cognitive gains, personal flourishing, identity reinforcement) and for communities (revitalization of social ties, upgrading of living environments). Cultural mediation activities, by putting people in direct contact with creative processes and cultural objects, emphasize many of these benefits. Cultural practice and expression are often understood as spaces where people live together.

Cultural mediation activities aim to:

- Develop an awareness of the diversity of art, heritage, and culture
- Facilitate personal expression and autonomy through a cultural activity
- Encourage an understanding of art disciplines and cultural fields
- Strengthen recognition of culture within society

They may offer various benefits, including:

- Positive encounters among artists, artworks, and members of the public
- Opportunities for exchanging and sharing experiences, ideas, and knowledge
- Dropping of psychological and social barriers
- Increased spread of culture into everyday life

They have direct and indirect effects:

- Awareness raising and formation of well-informed publics
- Development of personal capacities for expression and social skills
- Cognitive and motor development for individuals
- Increase in the social impact of culture

In different environments

Cities and local and regional administrations are instituting more and more mediation projects in collaboration with cultural and community spheres in order to form connections with their citizens and build a cultural policy adapted to their population. Mediation is a relevant tool in regional identity construction because it contributes to the offer of varied services reaching very diverse groups of people. These initiatives involve unusual encounters that help to fight cultural and social isolation, strengthen intergenerational ties, and develop connections among different cultural groups.

Participatory cultural activities may be designed by social agencies with the goal of creating a change, targeting specific clienteles (acquisition of tools for the purpose of empowerment and education), or aiming to change public opinion on issues in order to gain more citizen support. Cultural mediation is also used in a frame similar to those of municipalities when organizations wish to repair the social fabric of communities at risk or following extraordinary situations (such as wars or natural catastrophes). In all of these cases, cultural mediation generates connections and meaning that enhance the concept of living together.

In the school environment, enhancement of cultural life and art education are high priorities. Mediation activities that open the door to culture enable schools to stimulate children's curiosity and engage them in new sensory experiences. Some schools use mediation activities as factors in transversal education or scientific mediation in order to transmit knowledge that is difficult to assimilate in ways other than through coursework (for example, pairing a mathematics problem with a music show). Some initiatives are aimed more directly at fighting dropping out.

For cultural institutions, notably those devoted to the performing arts, initiatives are often intended to respond to audience-development issues. Strategies and activities aim to go beyond simple accessibility measures (such as pricing policies) to build more committed and lasting relationships with the surrounding community. Heritage institutions and museums, as well as libraries, whose primary mission is the conservation and transmission of knowledge, may also envisage participatory strategies highlighting the contribution of individuals to the creation of meaning.

Artists and creators become involved at any point in the wide spectrum of cultural mediation. More and more projects integrate citizens into the initial process of conception and collective creation, supported by new public funding. The cultural mediation space may also act as an assessment tool for creators, in that the encounter with the public enables them to present their work to diverse audiences. This practice is often part of artist residencies carried out, for example, in cultural centres (such as the Maisons de la culture). A number of presenters will ask artists to create cultural mediation activities as part of the presentation of their work (such as meeting with the public before or after the show) in order to complement their programming with a different kind of activity. Cultural mediation, by inscribing cultural practices* into living environments, thus opens new avenues of employment for artists and cultural workers.

In short, cultural mediation helps to enhance individuals' cultural experience by creating connections among actors from different spheres from which each may draw specific benefits. Cultural institutions make it possible for community organizations and firms to reach their objectives, as they have new access to populations traditionally more remote from what they are offering (non-publics*). Cultural thus plays a predominant role in these new dynamics, by encouraging denser social connections.

H How do we evaluate the impacts of mediation?

Although it is often difficult to measure the impacts of mediation over a short period of time, it is important to develop adapted tools to justify the legitimacy of cultural actions. Evaluation is a reflective, time-limited step that involves documenting and assessing the evolution and outcomes of a project. It also helps to highlight the meaning and relevance of cultural projects.

Therefore, designing an evaluation process specific to the project, the number of partners involved, the variety of expectations, and the relatively innovative nature of activities should be a strategic priority shared by all actors involved. The ideal evaluation process is thus integrated into the initial planning; it takes place continuously and is administered within the organization or by a project partner. As a training tool, it can guide actors and projects, and not be simply a way to measure performance. The assessment must be able to guide decision makers in their choices and in project management: the evaluation may challenge certain previous decisions and strategies, and this is when a critical faculty and a capacity for rapid adaptation are most useful for the project managers.

The evaluation process requires objectives and strategies that are clear to the various stakeholders; determination of the target audiences; and the choice of appropriate indicators, whether objective (numbers, rates, ratios) or subjective (testimonials, opinions, perceptions). It generally includes three steps: production of a framework for evaluation, administration of the evaluation (collection and organization of data), and interpretation, which will ultimately make it possible to create meaning from organized facts. Some steps may be divided and repeated – it might be desirable to interpret the data, for example, through production of progress reports several times during the evaluation process so that changes can be observed as they are occurring in the field.

F For more information

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