

Evaluations for Learning:

A discussion paper for the UK not-for-profit sector

“If we fail to link monitoring and evaluation to organisational learning processes, we reinforce practices that undermine freedom, responsibility and ownership – we reinforce exclusion, prevent people from assuming responsibility, deny autonomy and thus perpetuate dependence.”

Dlamini 2006

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The intended readership of this short paper is commissioners and funders within the UK statutory and voluntary sectors.

My aim is to explore the potential of evaluation as a tool for organisational learning and development.

Within the UK statutory and not-for-profit sectors, evaluations are common tools for accountability and for supporting fundraising.

Whilst all managers in these sectors will have service development and improvement in mind, few may be thinking about organisational learning in a formal sense, or exploring how to make better use of existing systems (such as evaluations) in a more creative way.

And few may be exposed to the growing body of expertise and theory about organisational learning within the international development sector.

This paper compares conventional evaluations and evaluations for learning. Some notes are offered for commissioners of evaluations, and the paper concludes with some questions for development.

What is an evaluation for Learning?

An evaluation for learning is specifically designed and intended to promote the capacity of the organisation for learning.

“Evaluation”: a moment-in-time assessment of a project’s or organisation’s outputs, outcomes and impact against its stated aims and targets, carried out by an external or internally-appointed evaluator.

“Promoting capacity for organisational learning”: developing the capacity of the organisation to facilitate its own learning. This includes the process of designing and participating in the evaluation; as well as the skills, knowledge and processes that the evaluator helps create or nurture and which can be sustained after the evaluation is completed.

The benefits of an evaluation for learning

Evaluations for Learning can have significant and more sustainable impacts on the organisation in question.

My experience is that evaluations often leave the organisation itself unchanged. An evaluation for learning, however, can encourage staff to:

- Strengthen attitudes of enquiry and accountability
- Build capacity in monitoring and evaluation
- Promote creativity and new ideas
- Strengthen existing evaluation processes
- Encourage flexibility and autonomy

Responses to this paper are welcomed.

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	Evaluation for accountability	Evaluation for learning
Purpose and intention		
Purpose of the evaluation	To assess a programme's or activity's outputs, outcomes and impact against stated aims and targets	As well as assessing the programme or activity, the purpose of the evaluation is to develop the capacity of the organisation to learn and improve (during the evaluation but primarily afterwards on an on-going basis). Create opportunities for new measures and monitoring mechanisms to emerge.
Nature of the evaluation	The evaluation could be summative, formative or developmental ¹ . Habitually, the evaluation is intended to enable project improvement and/or funding opportunities.	Likewise, but with the added explicit hope of producing emergent or unplanned learning – including surfacing activities or parts of the organisation not obviously under the remit of the evaluation's Terms of Reference
Learning framework	Single-loop learning (for definition, see endnote ²). Planned learning is emphasised.	Enables double and triple loop learning. Space is created for emergent as well as planned learning. The evaluation includes an assessment of the organisation's capacity to learn; either by direct assessment, or by observation during the evaluation process.
Ethos and values		
Decision to evaluate and Terms of Reference	The decision to evaluate is made by a manager, often following a pre-set timetable. The remit and intended use of the evaluation, if considered at all, are usually set according to external criteria and habit. The wider organisational benefits which could emerge from an evaluation are not understood or do not influence the decision to evaluate.	The process of decision-making involves staff and service users in deciding the reason for and purpose of an evaluation. The organisation's learning strategy or culture supports and influences this decision-making process. There is senior commitment to undertaking an evaluation of this type and to learn from the experience of doing so.
Ethos	The evaluator, usually external, will gather evidence and shape conclusions and recommendations on which the organisation reflects and, if appropriate, acts upon.	The organisation is the key stakeholder – and thus needs to be the key actor – in shaping and participating in its own learning experiences. A utilization-focussed approach is taken, in which the evaluation's intended users help shape the design and purpose of the evaluation. ³

Assessment	Assessment will be by the evaluator, to which the organisation can then respond	There is a greater element of self-assessment. The organisation places itself alongside the evaluator in identifying issues, designing the evaluation, generating and analysing evidence, and drawing conclusions.
Participation		
Participation by staff and other organisational stakeholders e.g. funders	Staff are usually instructed to make time to engage in the evaluation. Frequently this instruction is issued at the same time as the fact of the evaluation is communicated.	All participants in the evaluation are invited to engage in shaping the evaluation, or at least in contributing evidence. Participants' interest in the evaluation is matched with time and space to participate. A minimum level of participation (by staff) is set, and participants are enabled to contribute accordingly.
Participation by service users	By invitation via the organisation. Service users may not previously have been made aware that an evaluation is taking place	
Generating commitment	Participation is assumed, but no particular sanctions or rewards are prepared to support that participation.	Attention is given to generating commitment: curiosity is encouraged for example by participating in shaping the evaluation; assumptions and opposition are surfaced and worked through; and opportunities and benefits of participation are clearly communicated
Methodologies		
Process uses of the evaluation	Methodologies are chosen by the evaluator to fit the intended purpose	Methodologies are chosen which: enhance communication; build capacity; transfer evaluative skills and attitudes; and nurture an evaluation culture in the organisation (Patton).
Process flexibility	The evaluator's time-frame and deadline is fixed when the evaluation is commissioned.	Deadlines are set, but unallocated 'draw-down' days are made available for the evaluator to use as needed, to enable participation or for other unseen needs as the evaluation unfolds.
Methodology	Decided and implemented by the evaluator, usually with reference to a Steering Group to check progress	A shared process is used to agree the methodology. The process will include activities to build capacity for learning, such as collaborative evidence-gathering. A systematic and explicit learning process is designed with intermediate goals and outputs (Guijt).

Gathering and analysis of evidence, and drawing out findings, conclusions and recommendations	Evidence proceeds in one direction – towards the evaluator, often without being shared with the organisation until initial conclusions are drawn (such as within the draft report).	Staff and stakeholders are supported to research and record evidence. As organisational learning often takes place on a day-to-day basis, the evaluation process takes account of and supports this learning.
Techniques	Predominantly, though not exclusively: private interviews (1-2-1 or group) with the evaluator; data analysis; desk research.	As before, and also: focus groups, mapping, photographs and video diaries, oral histories (such as the Most Significant Change approach), graffiti walls, drama, role-plays etc. The emphasis is on learning not criticism.
The evaluator		
Qualities and values of the evaluator	Honesty, integrity, clarity, objectivity. Commitment to service improvement; able to act in the knowledge of service-users' needs as well as for the benefit of the organisation.	Additional qualities: The evaluator views themselves as primarily a facilitator of a process, and acts as a catalyst of collective inquiry. Values emergent learning. Considerable flexibility and open to others' insights on process and learning.
Evaluator's skills and knowledge	Interviewing, questioning and other evidence-gathering skills. Research and analysis skills. Knowledge of the organisation's context and aims.	Additional skills and knowledge: The skills of communication; process facilitation; conflict resolution. Knowledge of group dynamics, and of individual and organisational learning theories. Ability to design and organise effectively others' learning (Engel and Carlsson).
Working with the evaluation's results		
Reflection on report	In considering the report, the organisation engages in Single and perhaps Double Loop Learning	The organisation is supported to engage in Triple Loop Learning
Decision-making and action	Decision-making on the evaluation's conclusions and recommendations are taken within the organisation, usually led by more senior management.	Stakeholders are jointly expected to hold the keys to improving performance (Engel and Carlsson, p10)
Evaluating the evaluation	Focus is on the openness of the process, the utility of the recommendations and the experience of working with the evaluator	The 'meta-evaluation' should also include: Did the evaluation increase organisational capacity for learning?, and, How successful was the process in generating appropriate levels of engagement?

Some notes on commissioning and conducting an Evaluation for Learning

“Creating space for inquiry and reflection has not yet been met with equally strong and consistent support, partly because of the length of time it normally takes to harmonise the divergent opinions in more participatory approaches”.
Engel and Carlsson (2002) p13

Who decides many of the issues about an evaluation – such as its scope, purpose, timing and utilisation – are political decisions as much as practical. The taking of those decisions reveals much about an organisation’s power and authority structures.

Commissioners who step away from conventional models of evaluation towards evaluations for learning will notice that the potential autonomy and expectations of relevant staff are likely to be increased.

Commissioners must therefore be explicit as to the level of autonomy being granted; and – as importantly – ensure that the opportunities for that autonomy remain consistent throughout the evaluation process. This includes the decision-making process once the evaluation’s recommendations are made. For more on the political aspects of autonomy and decision-making in designing interventions, see the section “Political Authority as Initiation: the three decision modes”, page 27 et seq, *The Complete Facilitator’s Handbook*, John Heron 2000 Kogan Page

Some questions for development

- Do you recognise the portrayal of conventional evaluations and evaluations for learning within this paper? What changes would you make to their descriptions?
- What in your experience makes the difference between an evaluation which develops the organisation and one which leaves the organisation essentially unchanged?
- What scope do commissioners have to bring organisational capacity building into the remit of an evaluation? To what extent do they want to do so (either within an evaluation for learning, or via other methodologies)?

References and further reading

Beere, *Evaluation Capacity-Building: a tale of value-adding*, Evaluation Journal of Australasia, Vol 5 (New Series) no. 2 2005, pp 41-47, <http://www.aes.asn.au/conferences/2004/FR8-Beere,%20D.pdf>

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Engel and Carlsson, *Enhancing learning through evaluation: Approaches, dilemmas and some possible ways forward*, 2002, http://www.ecdpm.org/Web_ECDPM/Web/Content/Content.nsf/0/05A45EF48F023482C1256C7E00555A9C

Engel, Carlsson and van Zee, *Making evaluation results count: Internalising evidence by learning*, ECDPM Policy Management Brief No. 16, August 2003, <http://www.ecdpm.org/pmb16>

Gamble, *A developmental evaluation primer*, J W McConnell Family Foundation, 2008 <http://www.fondationmccconnell.ca>

Guijt and Woodhill with Berdegué and Visser, *Learning through E-Networks and Related M&E Issues* 2002 (particularly pages 6-7), <http://unjobs.org/authors/irene-guijt>

Quinn Patton, *Utilization-focussed evaluation checklist*, 2002 www.wmich.edu/evalctr/checklists

¹ The term Developmental Evaluation was created by Michael Quinn Patton to describe evaluations that take place in situations where goals and outcomes are not pre-set but rather evolve as learning occurs, particularly within "early stage innovations in complex environments" (Gamble, 2008).

² Single Loop Learning is generally understood as generating improvements within existing procedures. Double Loop Learning questions assumptions and values which formed those procedures. Triple Loop Learning challenges the organisation's principles and assumptions which may now need revision in the light of the evaluation.

³ For an example of an internal continual evaluation and self-assessment process within an organisation, see "Towards 'Better Evaluation' – an account of one internal practice", Sue Soal, Keynote address to the Australasian Evaluation Society, Conference September 2007 <http://www.cdra.org.za/LibraryandResources/Articles%20by%20CDRA.htm>