Evaluation: The grim reaper and safety

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ABSTRACT

It was Tuesday. The cry was heard the email says we have to evaluate our project. Instant panic, fear and loathing are generated. The inner speech of the project facilitator and project operatives could be charachterised as' we knew they were after us. We know how to sit this out! Resort to Scientific Method! Draw up a Questionnaire, and then evaluate the Questions according to our needs (don't rock the organisational boat and longevity of our employment). Clients will have next to no say in what the questions are or how they are to be used. You can be sure we are going to look good. We're not going to be a victim of the Grim Reaper, evaluation. Why evaluate this way? Why is the grim reaper associated with evaluation and how do we deal with it? This approach to evaluation does not serve the interests of the client, organisation or service provider.

This paper reports a method of evaluation that brokers safe relationships between evaluators, service users and providers. Engagement of service providers and the designers of service with clients' service needs drive the process. The engagement focuses on establishment of shared meanings of service to reorient the service practice of the organization. As a process of evaluation, brokerage focuses on clients' needs rather than on manipulating scientific method to create good press and claims of excellence. Brokerage is a useful notion for evaluators because it allows evaluators to be more than 'objective' recorders or advocates. A case study of brokerage in action underpins our paper.

INTRODUCTION

It has been our experience that in higher education 'good' evaluation tends to be based on a 'Scientific method' model of evaluation. According to this model, there is only one correct way of conducting an evaluation. It requires the evaluator to work from program goals to develop an instrument that is administered to clients/participants. A highly positive response from participants means that evaluators and program developers can make claims about the efficacy of their program. What do program evaluators learn from this process and what do we say about the small proportion of participants for whom the program does not seem to work quite so well? We propose an approach to evaluation that retains an objective facility and, at the same time, achieves structural and systemic change of the organisation through formative evaluation. We call this process 'brokerage'.

In this paper we describe how brokerage was used to evaluate the implementation of a University-wide program called Information Literacies Introductory Program (ILIP) (Milne, Gluck, Piesley, Peel, Myers, 1998). This program was designed to introduce beginning undergraduates to the information environment of the University and to provide students with a mechanism for achieving a basic level of information technology connectivity and information literacy (University of Wollongong, 1997). The Program is innovative and its development was the result of a concerted team effort involving staff from the Library, Information Technology Services (ITS), and educational development.

The Structure and Implementation of ILIP

The Introductory Program aims to ensure all new students, specifically undergraduates, have attained a minimum level of information literacies skills, to ensure that when they commence their study they are not completely overwhelmed by the wide

range of information resources available. Students are informed of the requirements of ILIP through the student diary, enrolment information and sessions during student orientation. ILIP requires students to:

- Activate their UNIX computer account
- Complete an information literacy program at the Library either as a self-paced option or in a workshop
- Complete and submit a web-based assignment developed around their activities in the information literacy session

THE PROCESS OF EVALUATING ILIP

As Tertiary Literacies Co-ordinator, one of Cath's responsibilities was to evaluate the operation of the Program. This involved assessing how closely it achieved the goals of student computer connectivity and basic information literacy. She used the number of successful assignment respondents as a measure for both these goals. She also planned to evaluate the program using an approach informed by the theoretical framework of Guba and Lincoln (1989). This involved accepting the existence of multiple perspectives about the effectiveness of the program based on the context of experience of the students and staff involved. The methodology was based on cluster evaluation in which students and staff are asked to provide their thoughts about the program and its implementation, accounts are constructed based on their comments and then the participants are asked to read the accounts and to modify them where necessary (Sanders, 1993). From the data collected, a picture was forming of student completion and satisfaction with the Program. All the students interviewed responded positively when they were asked about the Program. However in this case Cath, like other evaluators, was drawn into examining the products of a program and ignoring the process. Sometimes a fascination with quantitative data means that evaluators are heard to claim that a 95% success rate compared with a 70% before the introduction of the program, shows that the program has been effective. However, what about the 5% of students who do not seem to benefit? What can they tell us about the program? Often the groups who do not seem to respond to the introduction of a program are seen by evaluators and program developers as a problem rather than as a group that can teach us a lot about the effectiveness of a program.

In this case, the rate of successful completions seemed to indicate that the Program was very successful. However, a concerned telephone call from Russell, a Lecturer with the Aboriginal Education Centre (AEC), brought to the surface a whole range of issues associated with the demands of the implementation of that had been obscured by the number of successful completions. The introduction of ILIP placed extra demands on the administration system and brought to the fore ongoing issues associated with service and organisational practices that had to be addressed during the evaluation. We realise that a program's success with all students depends very much on the context in which the program is situated. Russell introduced a brokerage process between students and resources when he realised that the success of this Program was dependent on achieving structural and systemic change within the organisation. The difficulties experienced by students focussed our attention on the interface between Administrative Information Systems (AIS), ITS Client Services and Student Administration during and immediately after enrolment.

WHAT IS BROKERAGE?

Russell describes brokerage as a method for bringing participants and resources within the system together in a 'no blame' situation which, in this case, enabled an exploration of the interface between administrative, information systems and the participants. Thus these relationships are safe for clients/participants, service providers and evaluators. In the following sections we explain the processes that are necessary for the establishment of safety. Brokerage provides a basis for simultaneously exploring means of resolving participants' immediate issues and attempting to ensure that the solutions are structural and systemic. As a result these solutions become part of the system and so the broker does not need to be present continually.

Brokerage provides a means of creating safe relationships between all stakeholders so that the required systemic change can be achieved. Brokerage requires:

- Examination of the issues that participants are experiencing
- Ability to write a different story of experience
- Communication of 'no blame' intent
- Engagement the service providers
- Establishment of relationships and a collaborative environment

Examining the Issues that Participants are Experiencing

To learn what the issues are and to determine whether these issues are related to individuals, groups, or systems, the evaluator needs to be able to listen closely to the participants' stories about their experiences and to have a thorough knowledge of both the systems and groups involved. The evaluator/broker needs to be acceptable to all parties and have a workable relationship with them. It will not be possible to achieve positive outcomes for the participants or systemic change if relationships between the participants and the systems are not established (Kelly & Sewell, 1988).

For example, with the implementation of ILIP, Russell learned that some Aboriginal students had experienced difficulty activating their computer accounts. He sought to communicate with someone who could assist these students to gain access to the resource, in this case, a computer account. Once this was achieved for these students, it was important to ensure that the change that was applied was instituted systemically so that other students were not affected in the same way. In fact, about 200 students across campus were assisted by this change. The brokerage process (Gluck & Draisma, 1997; Sewell & Kelly, 1988) highlighted the value of listening to learners and using what they had to say to enhance the service culture of administrative and information systems for the benefit of all members of the University.

Being Able to Write a Different Story of Experience

Brokerage involves us in writing an alternative story. This enables the focus to shift from the 'problems' of individuals to examining how systems function in response to the implementation of a new program. For example, particular groups of students in tertiary institutions often are seen as being deficient in some way and therefore in need of remediation (Gluck, Vialle & Lysaght, 1999). However, brokerage encourages us to think about what the experiences of these students tells us about how systems are affected by the implementation of a new program and about the quality of our educational programs. The process of retelling this story depends on engaging both participants and resource providers so that they agree to be involved in the development of a collaborative space that focuses on systemic change. We no longer have 'problem groups'. Instead, we have issues that need to be examined more closely.
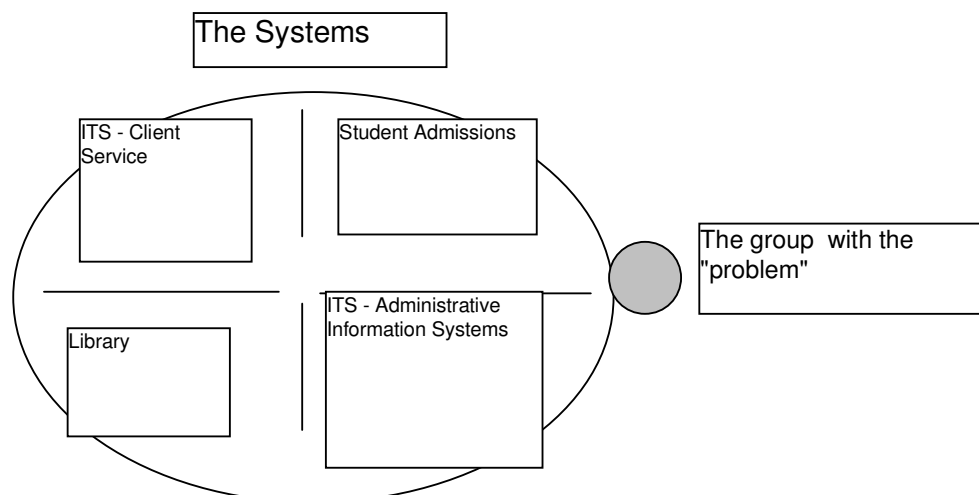
Figure 1 The Group with the Problem

As Figure 1 indicates, the group with the problem is often thought of as existing outside the system. Advocacy attempts to bring these groups into the centre of the system so that they are 'mainstreamed'. However, the structure of the system stays unchanged. As a result, the next 'problem' group that comes along will require the same level of advocacy as the previous group. With brokerage, we look towards the experiences of the participants on the edge and then work with them to achieve change that is more permanent as it is incorporated into the structures and systems of the organisation.

With brokerage the next step involves the realisation by resource providers that the participants on the edge have highlighted important issues that need further investigation. For this to occur, the broker/evaluator needs to establish a dialogue between resource or service providers and participants.

Engaging the system/service providers who provide the resources

Engaging the system/service providers requires acceptance by the service providers that the issue is related to systems in place. A knowledge of organisational defensive behaviours of the different service providers that make up the differing cultures of service is essential for this (Egan, 1994).

When Russell approached the computer engineer and his superior to find out why students from AEC were having such problems activating their computer accounts, that is, getting connected to the system and why they were being sent recursively from one service to another. He believed that the interaction with the computer engineer could be a catalyst for achieving organisational change and for connecting students with the necessary resources, that is, they would be able to activate their computer accounts. However, he also wanted to know why these issues had occurred and what could be done so that this situation did not happen again in the future (Argyris, 1990).

Espoused and Practiced Modes of Service

During the process of investigation and analysis of some of the issues that students had experienced, it seemed that perhaps part of the solution lay in considering how the notion of 'service' is practiced in work cultures of service providers that make up the University. Across structures, there are groups of service providers who have different perceptions of service and consequently different modes of operation (O Byrne & Levy, 1997). However, if communication and social relationships are established between service cultures and between service cultures and participants then structural networks of communication can be established. As a result, social relationships can become an integral aspect of service cultures.

If people who were working in a service role listened more closely to students, then the identification of students' difficulties as possible systems problems might have occurred sooner. Thus we could have had a situation such as that shown in Figure 2 where the value of the group's contribution is accepted and acted upon. This could have led a service provider to initiate contact with an engineer who could have investigated immediately the students' difficulties rather than the situation that occurred where students were sent individually from one service provider to another. Perhaps we need to look more closely at the 'theories in use' of service rather than the 'theory of service espoused' by service units (Argyris, 1990). For example there are two kinds of theories of action/service. The first is espoused theory consisting of beliefs, values and attitudes - the students learning needs come first. The second is theory in use - designed to produce defensive consequences and therefore requires defensive reasoning. Examples include; "… the student hasn't followed the instructions," "… they want to be spoon-fed," and, "… it's the

students fault not the technology or the system." The espoused values of service providers do not always coincide with the actions of service delivery. Expediency often leads providers to compromise their values and to justify the need for these compromises with reasons (Egan, 1994). However, once the issues have been identified and accepted by resource providers those involved can start to focus on the development of a collaborative space to explore and redefine how students and staff can readily access relationships that can contribute to the resolution of user issues (Gluck & Driasma, 1997).
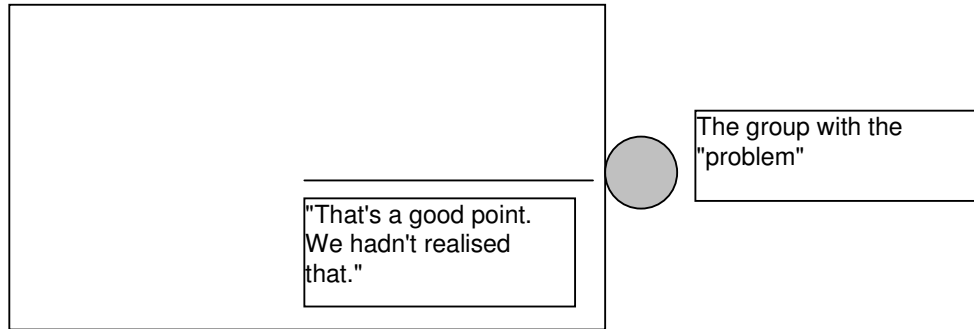
Figure 2 Realising the value of this group's experiences

Establishing a collaborative environment that focuses on systemic change.

The primary focus of brokerage is on establishing relationships between groups so that clients' needs are connected with resources, issues are resolved and the resolutions are incorporated simultaneously into systemic change (Gluck & Draisma, 1997).
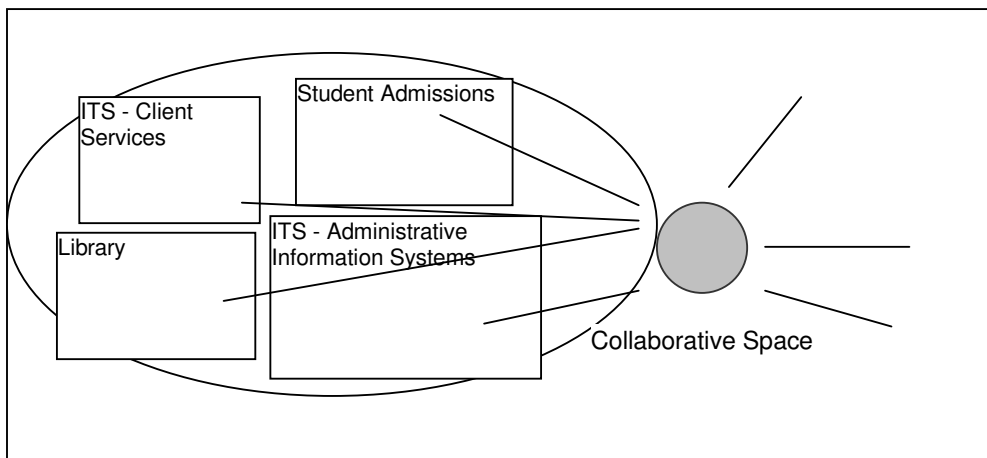
Figure 3 Looking Through the Eyes of the People on the Edge

The process of the Aboriginal Education Centre working with Administration Information Systems was equivalent to having the participants/students and the computer engineer working together. This led to the mapping of the interactions between participants and service providers so we could determine where problems existed and where collaborative environment needed be established (see Figure 3). It resulted in an elimination of the 'next desk' syndrome as a factor in service (Barabba, 1996). Throughout the process the engineer openly communicated concern that the students were being disadvantaged. He empathised with the students' frustration and expressed the hope that none would pull out of their course because of the experience. Collaboration with him led to the implementation of a number of changes to the structure of the organisation.

Another collaborative space was established between Library staff who had initially identified the difficulties that students experienced submitting the assignment, computer programmer and ILIP co-ordinator. As a result, the computer programmer who was responsible for putting the assignment, and its underlying database, on the web examined and tested the program extensively. He could not find any significant problem with the program but he introduced a file that recorded students who were unsuccessful in their initial attempts to complete the assignment. This meant that we could track their progress more clearly. He also suggested that we could use unique identifiers in the database next year to improve the security of the program so that students could not simply change the User Name and password at the top of the assignment and resubmit the assignment under another name

Communicating 'no blame' intent

The process of brokerage depends on the establishment of a positive relationship with the client/participant and the resource provider. This involves communicating to all a 'no blame' intent on their part. With 'no blame', others do not believe that they are under pressure or being judged negatively. A 'no blame' situation helps to militate against defensive behaviours and in the safe environment that is established issues can be examined, resources and clients needs mapped, and solutions proposed and implemented. It establishes a basis for further communication between the participants and the resource provider and for a loose collaboration of people to form so that systemic and structural changes can be implemented.

CONCLUSION

The experience of ILPIP for the vast majority of students and staff involved has been a positive one. It has been a very successful program and there are procedures in place to improve the communication of the requirements to students and the transparency of the assessment items. It has achieved its aims of increasing connectivity, introducing students to the information environment of the University and assisting students to develop some basic information literacies skills. The multiplicity of problems experienced by some Aboriginal students provided key indicators of the mainstream needs and directions for the investment of resources that can benefit the total learning environment of the University.

Brokerage provided an evaluation methodology for examining the experiences of a number of students as they strove to become connected to the system and for examining the influence of the organisational context on the implementation of the program. Within this context, issues were raised that are of significance to other learning organisations. Brokerage takes evaluation beyond objectivism and beyond advocacy (Gluck & Draisma, 1997; Stake, 1997). If these students had not persisted in their attempts to complete the requirements through the brokering process then it is possible that these issues would not have been thrown into relief and addressed in a manner that led to such positive outcomes and systemic change.

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