

Empowering Older Adults Through Engagement in the Evaluation Process: examples from adult and community education projects in Victoria

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Abstract

Since 1995, the Centre for Program Evaluation has been involved in several evaluations pertaining to older adult learning in Victoria. The foci of these have been to : determine the educational needs of the over 60s; create profiles of each University of the Third Age (U3A) in Victoria; assess the potential for introducing educational clustering arrangements; and examine venue requirements of U3As. Within each of these, the intention has been to move away from traditional evaluation practices where external evaluators control all aspects of the evaluation process. Rather, the evaluation team was expected, from the outset, to involve older adults as much as possible. This paper revisits the ideas behind the empowerment approach before drawing on the experiences of these projects to describe the way that participation and empowerment encourages. Specific processes utilised are outlined, as well as the benefits and limitations of the approach.

Key Words

empowerment evaluation, participatory evaluation, adult education, older adults

Mainly in response to David Fetterman's work over the past decade (1993-2002), empowerment evaluation has become an increasingly popular form of evaluation. As a result, a great deal of discussion has taken place in various forums about the theoretical and practical implications of this approach. This paper revisits the ideas that lie behind empowerment evaluation and examines how attempts have been to apply them to several older adult education projects in Victoria. Finally the advantages and limitations of the approach are discussed.

The Use of Empowerment Evaluation in Evaluation

Fetterman (2002) describes empowerment evaluation as "*the use of evaluation concepts, techniques and findings to foster self-determination*". The term 'self-determination' is seen as the ability to 'chart one's course in life' and consists of a number of interconnected capabilities related to enhanced decision-making and the ability to take action at the personal and collective level (Caulley, 199?).

The nature of self-determination is also reflected in two end goals of empowerment evaluation identified as 'illumination' and 'liberation' (Fetterman, 1994). Illumination reflects the development of a perceptive understanding of a program, its context, operation and effectiveness that leads to greater engagement and control through increased knowledge. Liberation takes this further through the opening up of new opportunities that challenge preconceived positions and structures, thereby allowing program participants insights into the possibilities of change, both within their own roles and within programs (Smith, 1998).

As a result of these aims of self-determination and enlightenment, empowerment evaluation is usually considered either for programs that assist disenfranchised or marginalised groups or for programs developed around social justice issues (Mertens, 1995). Program participants within such groups are perceived as having

limited power in shaping and controlling the services and policy decisions that impact on them as consumers and community members. The origins of their powerlessness may be based around socio-cultural factors such as gender, cultural background, age or socio-economic status or more specific features such as health status, substance use or homelessness.

Empowerment evaluation often works towards a restoration of this power by developing a sense of self-efficacy. This can be achieved through supporting program participants in the development of their ability to collect and manage information and to use this material to promote change. Consequently, the empowerment approach is grounded in collaborative, participatory and utilisation models of program evaluation (Smith, 1998) as well as collaborative and action research (Stull and Schensul, 1987, Oja, 1989, Whyte, 1990, McTaggart, 1991). Indeed, in some ways empowerment evaluation can be viewed as an extension of these approaches with its strong commitment to democratic processes, grassroots participation in decision-making, involvement of the disenfranchised and restoration of power and influence.

Fetterman (1994, 2002) indicated three approaches that could be used to support the empowerment evaluation process. These are: training, facilitation and advocacy. Each of these areas implies a specific role for the evaluator and seeks to develop the knowledge and skills of the program participants. More specifically,

- the training role requires a transfer of evaluation skills and knowledge from expert evaluators to participants in order to foster greater self-determination. Providing participants with the opportunity to participate in and manage the evaluation process increases personal and communal efficacy and ability to use the evaluation results to assist social and political action (Dullea & Mullender, 1999). In this way, the ability to help themselves is restored to the participants, and self-determination reinforced. However, as a consequence, empowerment evaluation may require more time than other evaluation approaches because of the learning and assimilation that is required (Smith, 1998).
- the facilitation role means a more involved role for the evaluator during the evaluation process by actively supporting the evaluation through the provision of information and direction. Fetterman (2002) also suggests that the facilitation and training process can assist in the building of ‘communities of practice’. These groups, united through their participation in the empowerment evaluation, develop common understandings that direct their involvement in the evaluation and create a sense of shared purpose. Creating a shared view becomes a central component of the evaluation process as knowledge is developed and communicated within the group. The success of empowerment evaluation is in many ways reliant on an environment that is not only supportive but also conducive to risk taking and sharing.
- the advocacy role implies the active involvement of evaluators in assisting the utilisation of the evaluation results to assist the process of change.

The Application of Empowerment Evaluation to Older Adult Education Projects in Victoria

The Active Seniors Project

The first project to be discussed took place in 1995. Funded by the Adult, Community and Further Education Board (ACFEB), and called the ‘*Active Seniors Project*’, the evaluation was to carry out a needs assessment of educational provision for over 60s in Victoria. This required the evaluator(s) to map State provision, identify barriers to participation and draw up plans for future directions. (Hurworth, 1996)

However, from the outset, as part of the project brief, there was an expectation that the commonly powerless or excluded older adult should be involved as much as possible. It was hoped that the Project would live up to its name and would address the idea that:

New forms of empowerment and participation must be investigated to counteract the social creation of dependency in old age. (Leonard et al., 1994:5)

Therefore, in light of Fetterman’s suggested roles, the selection criteria for an evaluator needed to be slightly different from usual. Not only did the person selected have to possess strong evaluation skills but also needed to be able to facilitate the process with older adults so that they could undertake much of the work themselves. In

this case, the evaluator chosen was one where “we could see (the evaluator) had the personality to work with older people well. We also selected (her) as she was a qualified teacher who could train people.”¹

Once engaged, the evaluator knew that the expectation was to involve older Victorians as much as possible. This raised a number of questions:

- To what extent did those commissioning the project expect older adults able to be involved and could this be extended?
- To what extent were older adults able to be engaged so that they would become ‘illuminated and liberated’?;
- What would the response of the older adults be when asked to take part?

To reveal the answers, the next section looks at various facets of the evaluation design.

Decisions for Finalising the Design

As usual for large-scale evaluations, there was a Steering Committee to guide the project. Over half the members were interested older adults over 70 and they helped to draw up the evaluation plan. This included defining what was meant by ‘education program’ for this evaluation as well as discussing sampling issues. The group also agreed that there were to be four components to the needs assessment with a literature review; series of focus groups, survey; and a day-long symposium where results would be presented.

Literature Review

As the area of older adult education is relatively new, one deliverable for the project was to be a literature synthesis concerning education for the older person. The Steering Committee determined that the review should cover: participation rates, benefits of participation; barriers to participation; international and national policy documents/reports; and exemplars of good practice both in Australia and overseas.

For this aspect, funders had expected a purely academic search of databases with no input from older people. However, the evaluator realised that this would produce mainly American material, so whenever she attended meetings or held interviews with older people she sought local material. This procedure led to contributions being sent from all over the State. Examples of material sent ranged from local newspaper articles to adult literacy newsletters. Word of the evaluation also spread to other States so that documents were also contributed by older adults in South Australia, NSW and the ACT. As a result, the review became a joint venture in which older people were able to contribute much more relevant material to the local context.

Focus Groups

The evaluation plan also outlined that focus groups would be held across Victoria to elicit a range of opinion about reasons for participating, or not, in educational activities, determine gaps in local provision, and identify future directions. It was decided that groups should reflect a range of geographic areas and include a mixture of older people. Eventually, fourteen groups took place. Half comprised those engaged in educational activity while the others involved migrants, hostel residents, Housing Commission residents, who were not. In addition, two groups of isolated and housebound older people were interviewed by telephone.

For this stage of the project, funders had only envisaged older adult involvement through participation in groups. However, it was possible to extend this quite considerably by inviting older adults from each ACFE region across the State to come to Melbourne to be trained as moderators or assistant moderators. As a result, fourteen trainees, who were mainly University of the Third Age (U3A) members, took part in a day-long training session. In the morning, the group was taught focus group theory and in the afternoon two practice groups were run. During an evaluation of the training, trainees made comments which demonstrated how the process had enhanced their skills and developed their knowledge (thereby empowering them):

It was organised in a straightforward manner and what I had to do was clearly set out. I learnt how to ‘pyramid’ information from a group in a business-like manner.

The day was challenging and professionally done. I knew nothing about Focus Groups before but now I do. I can see them being used within our own U3A for various purposes.

I wasn’t sure what to expect and was pleasantly surprised and impressed. My skills were improved by the experience.

¹ Comment made at first Steering Committee meeting

Those trained then organised or helped to run a focus group in their local area and elsewhere.

The Survey

Originally the commissioners of the evaluation had only expected the older person to be involved during interview and reporting stages. However, the evaluator intended that they should also be involved in the next stage of the project if possible as this would likely provide extra skills. This comprised a survey of nearly 600 ACFEB-funded sites that provided, or had the potential to provide, older adult education. The questionnaire sought information on what was provided, motivators and deterrents regarding participation, ideas for local development and benefits perceived for older adult education.

Some evaluators may have been inclined to send out a mailed survey to a sample of these sites. However, from experience, the response rate to such a strategy can be disappointing and of little use in decision-making. Mindful of wanting findings utilised and to continue giving control to the older adult, another team of twenty-seven U3A members from all over the State were trained as field interviewers. The intention was to follow the ideas of West who found using older adults as interviewers '*turns these 'wasted resources' into a gold mine'* (1979:11) Among the volunteers this time, were several who had already been involved at the focus group stage. These were joined by others.

For as many sites as possible interviewers actually visited venues to collect data. Where distances were too great, interviews were carried out by telephone. At first, no person had more than twenty sites for which to be responsible, but several keen people asked for more work. The whole strategy proved to be remarkably successful as of the (then) eleven ACFE regions the lowest return rate was 73% and in two regions an incredible 100% response rate was achieved. Furthermore, the advantage of the personal approach was that much richer detail was obtained than would have been possible through a mailed questionnaire.

At the end of this aspect of the project, a debriefing session for the interviewers was held so that these older adults could share their experiences. Here both negative and positive outcomes of the individualist interviewing experience could be shared with the evaluator. Comments revealed 'empowering' and 'liberating' effects whereby being involved had taught these volunteers about the nature of interviewing in research, as well as about the local communities they had visited. For example

Tracing people was difficult but I've learned that this is what happens in research.

I met such wonderful people out there that I could keep on interviewing for the rest of my life!

I've lived in the area all my life but I'm ashamed to say that I did not know about some of the places that I had to go to. Now I know what activities are available to me out there.

Data Entry and Initial Analysis

Once again it had been expected that the evaluator would enter and analyse all data and yet again older adult involvement was extended. Working as a team, six older adults transcribed or entered data for several weeks at the evaluator's workplace. They seemed to enjoy the experience with one person saying; "*I've enjoyed this. I've learnt a lot as this machine is quite different from the one I'm used to.*" Furthermore rather than just personal enhancement there was recognition that such involvement could lead to change:

Although I'm used to being in offices and administration and like this kind of thing, it's also good to know that we're helping towards this project that hopefully can change things for us older people.

The Symposium and Report

Once all the data had been collected and analysed there was a one-day session during which the evaluator reported on the draft project findings. All those who had been involved in the project in some way were invited to attend along with a range of other stakeholders so that nearly 100 attended. Interestingly, however, the evaluator had been requested not to write a final report and recommendations without input once more from these older adults themselves. So as part of the Symposium a series of workshops was run where participants assessed and added to the findings and then worked on the recommendation to ratify and order them. The feeling of being useful, being able to contribute, and of involvement leading to the self-determination described by Fetterman, was recorded on sheets evaluating the day's proceedings:

I found the whole day exciting and informative—especially hearing all the findings to which we have contributed.

The whole day has been challenging and I appreciated the idea of third age people being involved in making decisions.

But perhaps the best indicator that the evaluation had managed to achieve not only the stated objectives, but had served to empower older adults, came from a 74 year old who summed up the whole project and the symposium as follows:

I consider the whole process has been very valuable for us:

- a) *it has involved and stimulated older people*
- b) *it has given older learners an opportunity to express their opinions*
- c) *it has given older people the opportunity to review the recommendations, take issue with them and 'own' them.*

The Advocacy Role of the Evaluator

After the evaluation had officially ended the evaluator went on to advocate for older adult learning. For the next few years she undertook many activities including addressing AGMs of older adult groups; talking to adult and community education providers; being a keynote speaker at conferences about older adults; and writing in support of grants to enhance older adult education.

The Accommodation and Clusters Options (ACO) Project

The next project to be discussed was undertaken 2000-2001. The Accommodation and Clusters Options (ACO) Project was a joint venture funded by Department of Human Services (Positive Ageing) (DHS) and the Adult, Community and Further Education Board (ACFEB). DHS requested a study of the accommodation needs of U3As while the ACFEB wanted a detailed profile of all Universities of the Third Age (U3As)² to be the basis of a new database, as well a study of the potential for U3As to become involved in the Victorian Government's 'Clustering' initiative, in order to foster stronger infrastructure and more viable education provision (especially in rural areas).

Decisions for Finalising the Design

The projects had been initiated by U3A Network-Vic (Network), the parent body of the Victorian U3A Movement which is run in central Melbourne by volunteers from member U3As. Several of those involved had become active researchers within the last project and this, in conjunction with previous professional working experience, had led them to feel they could manage their own projects. Indeed a member of Network's Policy and Planning Subcommittee had spent considerable time preparing a program logic and evaluation plan which was to inform the upcoming evaluations and so it was expected that the team of evaluators appointed would be sympathetic to these ideas.³

Once again there was a Steering Committee. Except for the two representatives from the funding bodies the remainder of the dozen or so members were over 65. They brought to the table a wealth of past professional experience which included being a Senator, accountant, academic researcher, media technician and businessman. Working together the evaluators and Committee determined that, in the interests of efficiency, that there should be an intensive interview with each U3A's executive (president, vice-president, secretary and treasurer) in order to furnish information simultaneously, for the profile, accommodation and clustering elements. For the accommodation aspect it was decided to interview each Local Government area in the State.

Preliminary Work

Right from the beginning older adults were involved in organising the Project which was run from a special office in the centre of Melbourne. Specifically :

- the secretary of U3A Network, set up and maintained the ACO Office, organised Steering Committee meetings and provided regular assistance when requested. She commented that she "liked to keep busy."
- two U3A members installed the computing hardware and software

² U3As provide educational, social and recreational activities for the older person. Fees are minimal because the majority of management, administration and teaching is undertaken by members. Currently there are 62 U3As with over 16,000 members (mainly 60-79 years old) across rural and metropolitan Victoria.

³ He and the Network President were also instrumental in appointing the chief evaluator

- one man came a considerable distance into Central Melbourne in order to procure maps, locate U3A sites round Australia and also plot home postcodes of the U3A membership. He came regularly when he was free and reported that he “*enjoyed pottering with maps.*”
- the same person also assisted in a preliminary telephone survey of all U3As to gain an indication of links U3As had already established with local community organisations.
- a project worker (who was also a U3A computer tutor), was specifically appointed to set up an Access database. She worked on entering data and producing reports throughout the Project.

In addition, members of Network were consulted in the development of the interview schedules. For instance, questions on how the recently introduced GST was affecting U3As were scrutinised by a former accountant, questions on the use of technology by U3As were created by a former multi-media specialist, and questions about Network resources were suggested by the Network Services Officer.

A Preliminary Forum

In the first few weeks of the Project representatives from all U3As were invited to a Forum to explore the notion of ‘clustering’ and how it could enhance U3A viability. Here they could hear first-hand from the ACFEB what it entailed and what it would mean for the individual U3A. Meanwhile U3As themselves put forward a number of questions for discussion. These democratic inputs provided an opportunity for all those present to think broadly about the political and economic imperatives involved in connecting with other U3As and/or other agencies, as well as to consider advantages and disadvantages of the initiative. This allowed older adults to be aware of all the issues which could impact on U3A future choices and to feel that U3As could have some control over their futures. Some of those attending described how they were “*grateful to have a chance to hear things from the horse’s mouth*” and “*to hear what other U3As are thinking and doing*” so that “*we can make informed decisions about all this.*”

The Interviews

Two kinds of interviews were needed for this joint project. One was with each of the 62 U3As and the other with 74 Local Government Areas (LGAs) across Victoria. Each schedule was long and from experience would normally result in poor return rates. Consequently, it was decided, as in the Active Seniors Project, that each site should be visited personally in order to obtain optimal data and a richer understanding of U3A and LGA contexts.

As part of the empowerment process it was essential to recruit and train interviewers from the U3A movement. Those selected were taken through the interview and given a ‘tips sheet’ but often they also had previous interviewing skills or relevant prior experience. For instance, those taking part included a past journalist, teacher, librarian, market research manager and lawyer. These people valued being part of the project and certainly gained insights, or ‘illumination’ in the sense outlined by Fetterman, explaining:

It's so interesting to see how other U3As function and to see how they compare with my own. I had no idea about some of the difficulties some have to face.

I saw some good management and ideas out there and so have a few things to take back to my own set up.

For a couple of interviewers there was also the possibility of combining the first interviewing task with Network’s rural outreach work, in order to build local U3A capacity. Growth for U3As also occurred as a result of requesting them to prepare statistical and other information in advance (with some even going to the extent of producing beautifully bound profiles of their own U3A). For some this preparation made them consider how to use statistics for other purposes such as marketing, while for others it led to thinking about how to upgrade their record/computer systems.

The second interview with local councils was also valuable for empowering U3As. Besides the evaluators being present, all U3As within the LGA boundary sent along one or two representatives from their executive. This meant that anywhere between four and ten people present and the exercise provided an invaluable opportunity for U3As to present any issues they had with accommodation or other matters. It also gave LGAs the opportunity to educate U3As about their management policies concerning local facilities and to inform them of possible grants or other kinds of assistance available.

At some interviews the U3A representatives were well-known to the LGA but at other times it was the first time that the parties had met. This provided an ‘education’ for each side as some LGAs, especially rural ones,

possessed minimal knowledge of the U3A movement while the U3As had never approached Councils before and had no idea about council policies or constraints.

By the end of the project there was mutual recognition that the relationship between U3As and LGAs needs to be one of partnership and that they need to work together in a conciliatory rather than adversarial way to maximise U3A impact on the local community. U3As were encouraged to maintain a dialogue with local government in order to effect change and so it was suggested that:

U3As need to 'keep in their Council's face' by inviting council members to events. They also need to lobby councils to write policy on U3As.

In such ways the U3As can be empowered to feel in control of their situation and to feel that they are part of the local decision-making process.

Outcomes of the ACO Project

Since the completion of the ACO Project there are some other indicators that the empowerment effects have continued. For example:

- a successful submission was made for funding to up-date and maintain the database which had been created during the project. The U3A member who had been employed to set it up has continued to work one day a week to do this.
- Network feels that it now really knows and understands its constituents much better.
- many U3As are now more proactive in working with Councils and local communities.

Some Reflections on the Empowerment Process

Overall the process of engaging and empowering older adults has been exciting but demanding. Reflecting on the projects described:

1. We have found that the older adults:

- were initially wary but once involved became active and engaged
- found training and interview processes more enjoyable than anticipated
- learnt a new range of skills which led to useful results
- developed a sense of confidence and equality when working with the evaluators
- came to feel that they had a valuable role and contribution to make
- had a sense of teamwork and pulling together to create new strength of purpose
- became confident enough to continue with their own research and evaluation
- went on to use the information from the reports as ammunition to lobby government departments and Local Governments for improvements regarding older adult education.

2. From the perspective of the evaluators the empowerment process:

- led to more administrative and interactive work than in traditional approaches
- required the evaluator(s) to build rapport quickly
- needed greater personal commitment from evaluators than in traditional approaches
- led to continued involvement as an advocate for U3As and older adult education. For example the evaluators have been asked to address Council meetings, discuss provision at the Regional level, provide references for grant submissions, and be keynote speakers at conferences.

3. For both parties:

- there was genuine two-way assistance. For example, during these projects older people's desire to help was demonstrated through continual offers of assistance and involvement. In return, the evaluators have been able to promote U3As and older adult education generally, in the wider community.

Overall, though, the ultimate aim in both projects was to foster a feeling whereby the older adult has had a sense of partnership in, an ownership of the projects described. As a result fruitful dialogue between various stakeholders has begun to occur so that more appropriate provision of older adult education programs in Victoria may develop. Most importantly there is a sense that the use of empowerment approaches has allowed older people, who have been actively engaged and learning along the way, to feel that they have made a valuable contribution to their own educational futures.

Such sentiments also support the views of the current Victorian Government which in its ‘Growing Victoria Together’ statement includes a priority action to ‘support older people to live active lives in the community’ and to build opportunities for lifelong learning for every Victorian. Therefore, the Office for Senior Victorians is promoting “The Age to Be” where older age it is: “*the age to be valued; the age to be involved; the age to be productive; and the age to be active*”. (www.seniors.vic.gov.au).

A Concluding Remark

In conclusion, empowerment implies the increase of feelings of power, justice and control over life and decisions affecting life. As Iutcovitch (1993) points out the desire for empowerment in program interventions is an ambitious one but increasingly desirable with ever-growing demands for both accountability to the customer/user and society’s increased encouragement for self-determination. This is in contrast with previous practice when it was common to use a more patronising approach in which external evaluators and other bodies would hold most of the power. Such a way of operating fails to make use of the strengths and talents possessed by people experiencing programs.

With a desire for empowerment comes an associated wish to work on an equal footing with stakeholders and especially with the grass roots consumers of programs. Therefore, any evaluator involved in an empowerment project needs to play a major role in facilitating people to help themselves. With this in mind, we believe that the projects just described have allowed older people to make a valuable contribution to their own futures. Hopefully we have also begun to fulfil Love’s prophecy outlined at the 1994 Australasian Evaluation Conference where he felt that:

We are beginning to enter an era where it will no longer be the right of the external evaluator to play God. Evaluators will be the participants. They will be 90 and they will be 4 years old. (Love, 1994)

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