

Reflections on learning about Australasian evaluation theory and practice

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Introduction

Based on the reflections of the panel, my experience of the conference, and my current understanding of contemporary evaluation practice, I have been asked to provide a general commentary on developments in the field, and some recommendations for future learning. This has been a wonderful brief – to lurk and loiter, to listen and learn, and to bring much of what I have experienced back to this whole group. I would like to thank everyone who has given me permission to quote them.

In this paper I want to present some images which may help to sustain our learning, our practice, our theory, and our quest to make a difference through evaluation. In the end, the choice was pretty easy - the film ‘The Fellowship of the Ring.’

Few people realises that ‘The Fellowship of the Ring’ is actually an evaluation training film, cleverly disguised to encourage a wider audience. Galadriel, for example, is clearly an evaluator. Her mirror shows what is, what has been, and some things that have not yet come to pass. She offers to hold this mirror up for others to look into, knowing that the truth will sometimes be painful. Much of the film involves discussions about wielding power – its attractiveness, its potential to corrupt the well intentioned, and the merits and risks of choosing to give it away. Similar discussions occur in evaluation – for example the paper by English et al (2002) at this conference, and the theme of next year’s AES conference in Auckland.

The film provides us with images that are international, interdisciplinary, and inspirational.

International

The film itself is the result of international collaboration – an English writer (born in South Africa), an American producer, a New Zealand director, and an international cast including Europeans and Australians.

In the same way, at this conference we have been able to combine and engage with ideas and examples from around the world, not with a cultural cringe, not with the arrogant dismissal of Not Invented Here, but thoughtfully considering their local applicability. I have appreciated the way in which our two keynote speakers have introduced examples from the American and British contexts, and how the Presidential Address discussed issues arising at the European conference.

Interdisciplinary

The film is also about interdisciplinary collaboration. Its main focus is on an interdisciplinary team, who have to learn to understand each other’s different perspectives, and to work together with their complementary tools. An axe is not the same as a bow. They also have to learn about each other’s strengths and weaknesses.

As people who care about evaluation, we have to take a journey together to understand our different perspectives, and what we have to offer. I think we do this quite well in Australia and New Zealand. It’s a factor of our relatively small size that we end up

talking with and working with people from different disciplinary backgrounds, particularly at interdisciplinary conferences such as these. But it takes time.

Furthermore, discipline difference is not the only background that influences our practice, and the practice of those we work with. I was impressed by a deceptively simple question that Brenda Smith asked participants at a session on indigenous perspectives on evaluation: "What is your history and how does it shape your work?"

In the discussions in this session, we all found many different parts of our histories that influence where and how we work, including personal histories, family histories, cultural histories, and professional histories. These can be the source of our strengths and unexpected weaknesses. Because of our different histories, we can have quite different views about how things are, how things work, and what should be done to change things. These different notions of reality can be illuminating but also difficult to accommodate in diverse teams. In the film, the fellowship members also bring different histories with them - and understanding and accommodating their different histories is an important part of them learning to work together as a team.

Inspirational

Finally, the film is inspirational. The heroes have integrity. And while there remain some gender issues, as there are in evaluation (the focus of an interesting session at the conference), the men are both kind and brave - and so are the women.

Now, as many of us know from qualitative data analysis, any metaphor can be pushed too far, and I'll leave it to you to decide whether there are useful parallels in evaluation practice to the characters of Gollum, the cave troll, and the foolish Pippin Took. Instead I want to focus on three issues for evaluation – the quest, fear and anxiety, and fellowship.

The Quest

The purpose of evaluation

This conference has had an emphasis on making a difference – to the projects and programs we are involved in evaluating, to the organisations we work with, and for the people whom these projects and organisations are intended to benefit.

This contrasts with some evaluation textbooks – for example Berk and Ross (1990) , who have argued "...an evaluation may be successful even if the information is ignored or even misused. Once the findings are presented in a clear and accessible fashion, the evaluation is over. What follows is certainly critical, but is essentially a political process. Interested evaluators are best off observing the action at some distance, preferably through heavy lenses."

And it contrasts with the view expressed by Saville Kushner in his keynote address to the conference, who said: "I don't think it's our job to change the world, merely to understand it."

From my observations of the discussions about evaluation during this conference, most people are seeking to do evaluation that does change the world from what would have happened otherwise. Like many of our programs, we don't have control, and maybe not even a role, along the entire causal chain. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't worry about it, or seek to have more of an effect.

Importantly, this focus on making a difference has not only been expressed by conference presenters about participatory evaluation, but also evaluators talking about developing performance indicators and conducting independent evaluations that they hope will make

a difference by assisting government to be more efficient and effective, and to make better purchasing decisions.

Sometimes our evaluations do not make a positive difference - sometimes because of the inadequacies of the evaluations, and sometimes because of the circumstances in which they have been conducted, and we wish conditions were different - as do all who live to see such times. As Gandalf observes: "What they have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to them."

But how do we deal with the times that are given to us, and how should we practice evaluations in difficult circumstances? Are there times when evaluation is not helpful? Sometimes the way in which an evaluation is done poorly matches the times and it is not useful. But there are sometimes overly optimistic claims made for evaluation. As Bron McDonald pointed out in one of the conference sessions: "Some people think evaluation is always good for you – it's like brushing your teeth"

Instead we need to understand the ways in which evaluation can be a waste of time or even make a negative difference, and when, and how, for whom and in what ways can evaluation make a positive difference??

The scope of evaluation

Part of what we might do is to work to expand the scope of what is evaluated.

Internationally, much evaluation work has focused on the evaluation of innovations and pilots. Even in Australasia there is some emphasis on this. This can mean that evaluation is consigned to the side-shows of public policy and service delivery - focusing narrowly on interventions that are of marginal importance compared to the whole scope of activity being undertaken. As Teresa Wall exclaimed at a session during the conference: "We are constantly being asked to evaluate fluff."

The other problem with a focus on small evaluations of small program is that many of the issues that programs are designed to address are large and complex – for example, global warming; salinity; poverty; generational unemployment; family stress and problems; failure of schools to engage and educate all students. If tiny, uncoordinated projects are implemented and evaluated without reference to the need to make the larger service system work better, there is a risk of concluding that "nothing works" – because we have evidence that, by themselves, each piece of the jigsaw is ineffective.

So it is encouraging to see at this conference and elsewhere some organisations take a more systemic view of what is to be evaluated. It remains to be seen if our evaluation theory and practice can respond to these larger demands, given that it has largely been built on the evaluation of discrete projects.

Fear and anxiety

In 'The Fellowship of the Ring' there is a great deal of fear and anxiety as the characters run away from Dark Riders, orcs, and other worries. An important part of dealing with these is to start by recognising the legitimate fear:

Strider: Are you frightened?

Frodo: Yes

Strider: Not nearly frightened enough. I know what hunts you

My colleague Helen Goodman has made me realise how little we talk about emotions in evaluation. And yet fear and anxiety are important motivators for people working in programs, commissioning evaluations, and undertaking evaluations, who sometimes, late at night, ask themselves the same questions: *Is it going OK? Why is it so hard? Am I competent? Will they find out?*

This fear and anxiety can influence how evaluations are framed, conducted and their impact. It is worth remembering House's (1974) prescient comments about the fears of administrators and program staff:

I have considered at length the supreme importance for innovation of people pursuing their careers and of innovative projects serving as primary vehicles for administrative promotion and advancement. What I should now add is that not only does the upwardly mobile person need a project with which to build his reputation but the project ideally must be without blemish. Within our system as it operates, the *appearance* of the project is as important as the project itself. This puts the evaluator on a collision course with the project staff. No matter how balanced the evaluation report, the evaluator is certain to uncover problems.

As long as knowledge of the problem is private, their discovery is simply disagreeable to the project personnel. Making these blemishes public is to damage the administrative entrepreneur's career so that he must always face the possibility of someone uncovering an inadequacy from his past - a man with a prison record. The administrator's career, and perhaps his personality demand perfection or its appearance. Now I realise there are administrators, even some wholly committed to their own advancement, who are able to entertain and even make public, their mistakes. But my experience is that such people are rare. The evaluator must be in political trouble when uncovering flaws in the project."

There are other sources of anxiety as well. Many of the projects and programs we evaluate are innovations, where it is not clear how to do them well, or what resources are required. In one of the conference sessions, Bob Williams presented Csikszentmihalyi's framework, which maps skill against challenge as follows:

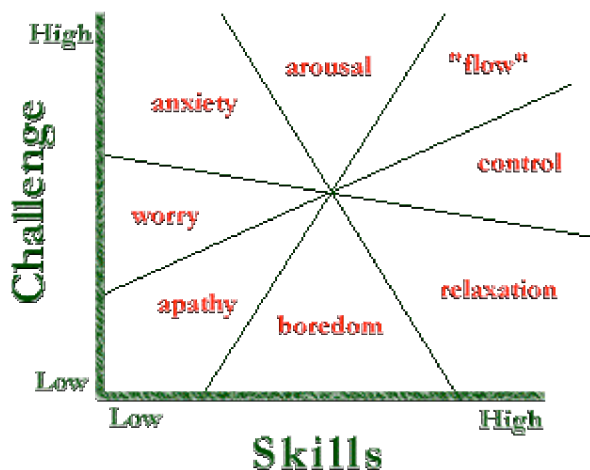


Figure 1 Mapping the level of skill against the level of challenge (from Farmer 1999).

'Flow' – the most productive situation - occurs when there is both a high challenge and high skills), when a difficult task can be completed well. Bob suggested that 'arousal', when the available resources do not quite match the level of challenge, is a state in which most innovation occurs. We cannot stay indefinitely in a state of flow, and need time out in other states, including boredom.

Perhaps part of the role of evaluation is to help people and organisations to identify the gaps between skills and challenge – to help develop a state of arousal that can lead to innovation and learning, which can then lead to greater skill, and to subsequent experiences of flow.

It may be, however, that 'anxiety', where the challenge of the task outstrips the available skills, may be a more common characterisation of many human services. What do we have to do for effective evaluation in such circumstances? How should we manage this

anxiety? I also wonder whether the focus on skills (which reflects the empirical research which underpins this framework) might be usefully expanded to also include the time available to spend on a task, and other structural issues that influence our ability to do something well.

It is important to recognise that this anxiety is not only at a personal level. There can be a wide anxiety and need to see problems and solutions as tangible, specific, defined and manageable, and to resist evaluations that create more ambiguity and uncertainty, that identify more problems and more inadequacies in what are seen as solutions.

There has been a lot of discussion at this conference about the need to work in an evaluation to create a safe space, and to develop trust – not just in order to collect data, but in order to be able to ask the hard questions, and to have the answers attended to.

There is also the anxiety that is felt by those who do evaluation. The Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Evaluation (<http://www.aes.asn.au/ethics.cfm>) require us to practise within the limits of our competence.

"The evaluator or evaluation team should possess the knowledge, abilities, skills and experience appropriate to undertake the tasks proposed in the evaluation. Evaluators should fairly represent their competence, and should not practice beyond it. "

However, interdisciplinary disciplines such as evaluation pose immense challenges to our skills. Since every evaluation needs to be designed and implemented in ways that best suit its peculiar context, there is often a steep learning curve in evaluations, and attendant anxiety.

I have been heartened by many of the presentations at this conference where presenters have also talked honestly about their own anxiety as evaluators, about the limitations of the evaluation, of their own uncertainty about particular approaches, and about their feelings of vulnerability in discussing issues where they are uncertain. We need to encourage competence in evaluations, but also to allow discussion of uncertainties and difficulties.

The Fellowship

Finally, there is fellowship. The way ahead can be hard, and we need friends. Every Frodo charged with a difficult quest needs a loyal, supportive Sam. This can be especially difficult for people who work on evaluation in isolation or in very small and stretched units.

Evaluation conferences are an important part of building and maintaining the fellowship we need. Our conferences need to sustain our passion and hope that we can make a positive difference through building evaluation theory and practice. I have sometimes wondered what an evaluation conference would look like if it was run by people who knew and cared about knowledge building and utilisation (or knowledge caring and sharing, as Susan Goff described it in one of the sessions). I think we are starting to see this in our Australasian evaluation conferences. Several people during the conference talked to me about the importance of the evaluation conference as an annual opportunity to 'recharge' their enthusiasm through support from professional colleagues, as well as through exposure to new ideas.

This conference was remarkably engaging. It had a mix of interactive and presentational formats so there has been both process and content. Not all sessions worked for everyone, but there was a remarkable level of discussion after sessions, and a noticeable level of linkages being made between sessions – and a willingness to revise the program to better meet needs.

The conference also had a range of people attending: some people whose primary professional identification is as 'evaluator', some evaluation academics, but many more people who do some evaluation as part of their job, or who commission, or manage or use evaluations.

However, there are many people who are not at this conference, even though they are involved in evaluation. There are few health program evaluators here, for example, few indigenous program evaluators (particularly from Australia), and few representatives from client advocate groups whose evaluation needs may be quite different.

How can we engage these people in our conferences and more generally? We might actively work to involve them in conference sessions and presentations, developing joint presentations and specialist streams, perhaps working with other associations and societies to bring the conference to the attention of other people, and to develop a program that will address their particular evaluation needs. We might develop flexible and targeted conference registration options for particular sectors with limited resources to support their attendance. The American Evaluation Association has a silent auction each year to raise money for travel awards to support attendance by particular groups (in their case particularly international development which both lacks funding to support attendance and has great travel distance); the AES currently provides travel grants for students. We might look to develop some more targeted support.

We can also work towards creating something from the conferences that is accessible to those who could not attend. The 2002 AES Conference was remarkably quick to post conference papers on the web site (<http://www.aes.asn.au/conference/cfindex.htm>) which provide an important resource to a broader community. Christine Fahey, in one of the conference sessions, suggested another way of reaching out to non-attenders – the development of discussion papers about issues and concerns identified at the conference. For example at the 2002 conference, there were recurring discussions about difficulties in evaluation contracts (especially the often unrealistic expectation that the methodology and budget can be determined and set before detailed investigation of the program and the evaluation needs), the need for evaluation that is not program-centric but looks at the broader system (including other services) that affects program clients, and the advantages and disadvantages of involving evaluators in program design. Each of these could be the basis of a discussion paper that could be widely circulated to commissioners of evaluation and those conducting evaluation.

Apart from conference, we need to continue our efforts to build and maintain communities of practice and learning through formal and informal means, such as evaluation conferences, regional meetings, informal lunchtime seminars, peer mentoring, confessional stories, and engagement, including the appropriate use of electronic communities, web-sites and discussion lists. We need to build supportive networks based on norms of trust and reciprocity. We need to feel we are among friends, to contain the anxiety we can feel, and to affirm us in our efforts.

This fellowship will enable us to continue to learn. It will sustain us. And it will support us in our quest of making a difference.

Acknowledgements

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