Keeping Evaluation Reports off the Shelf:

Using Multiple Media to Engage Decision Makers

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Abstract

In 2005-2006 Research New Zealand conducted an evaluation of an education initiative on behalf of the Ministry of Education in New Zealand. To communicate the findings to a diverse group of stakeholders (schools, teachers, principals, policy makers), and to generate collaboration and ownership of the policy and operational decisions, the evaluation team used story based multimedia (SBMM) to engage the client and stakeholders in the findings. A multimedia story was made by the evaluation team and it used video, narration, images and music to connect stakeholders with the findings. The story was supported by other media (PowerPoint, discussion guides and a written report) for reporting. The result from using this approach was that stakeholders quickly became engaged with the key evaluation findings, issues and collaborated on ways to enhance the education initiative.

> *"....Enter stories. Facts inform, but stories resonate. Facts can be filed away. Stories inspire. Stories connect us in profound ways that go beyond mere intellect and get to deep currents that move us to reflection and inspiration..."* **Lori Silverman (2006).**

Introduction

One of the challenges facing evaluators and commissioners of evaluations is how to get evaluation findings used by decision makers within the agency or organisation. Another challenge is how to disseminate the findings to the range of stakeholders. Patton (1996) strongly promotes setting a context for "narrowing the gap between generating evaluation findings and actually using those findings for programme decision making and improvement".

The evaluation context for overcoming these challenges relates to the evaluation design phase[1] where reporting and dissemination strategies to key stakeholders need to be considered. These strategies require evaluators to consider the media for reporting the evaluation components to enable a range of stakeholders to connect with the findings.

These issues were faced by Research New Zealand in an evaluation of an education initiative[2] that placed additional special needs teachers in schools in New Zealand.[3] The final mix of reporting components selected to communicate the findings included a multimedia story, a PowerPoint presentation, discussion guides for facilitated sessions and a written report. This paper describes the thinking and key elements that supported the development of these communication tools.

Why use story based multimedia?

The education initiative and the evaluation included a diverse range of stakeholders. There was a communication challenge for the evaluation team of connecting stakeholders to the evaluation findings and providing a foundation for the:

υ   collective development of policy and operation decisions

υ   widespread ownership of an agreed way forward.

SBMM was identified as means to quickly engage stakeholders with the key evaluation findings and generate active conversations about future developments for the SLS initiative. The use of a story format with images, music and text was a way to inspire action. The objective of this approach was to motivate key policy and operational stakeholders and communicate that refinements to the initiative were achievable.

In communicating the evaluation findings, the aims were first to engage stakeholders with the 'evaluation story' and then use a PowerPoint presentation to provide the evidence base for the key findings. This was further supported by a formal report providing the details from the evaluation.

[1] The way these report components can be disseminated is identified in the design phase with the aim of maximising "intended uses by intended users" (Patton, 1997).

[2] For the Ministry of Education (MOE).

[3] See the education initiative case study summary at the end of this paper for further details on the project.

Communicating evaluation findings using story based multimedia

Human experiences are a starting point for evaluation. The stories gathered by evaluators are the foundation for and the doorway to stakeholder understanding and change. From the evaluation data, evaluators can identify significant themes. These themes are the 'springboard'[4] for evaluators to communicate the issues and for stakeholders to make decisions about the future.

In many evaluation projects, there are multiple stakeholders with different perspectives and views on the issues. To effectively communicate the findings, connect stakeholders to the key issues and enable them to collaborate on the way forward, evaluators often need to think about telling their story in a way that resonates with multiple communication preferences and learning styles. This inevitably means employing a range of communication tools to get active conversations between stakeholders.

Stakeholder engagement and interest cannot be assumed. Effective stakeholder engagement occurs at three levels: the head, the heart and action (think, feel, and do). Evaluators therefore need to design their communication to appeal to all three levels to obtain:

υ   an understanding of the findings

υ   motivation to address the issues

υ   collaboration on solutions

υ   ownership of the way forward.

With the Ministry of Education evaluation, the reporting strategy was formulated by first identifying the key groups of stakeholders. Secondly, using the framework (think, feel, do), the various stakeholder reactions to the findings were identified and then the evaluators considered the most effective approach to communicate their message across.

Questions included:

υ   What do we want the operational policy unit to think, feel and then do?

υ   How does this group like to receive information?

The above questions were debated in relation to the key 'springboard' themes and identified as being relevant to each stakeholder group. This then enabled the evaluators to think about selecting and tailoring the reporting media to the stakeholder groups.

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[4] Refer to next page about the conceptual background to 'springboard' stories.

A SBMM approach to communicating the findings was used because this approach offered the greatest flexibility to tailor the approach to meet the interests of stakeholders, Ministry of Education policy personnel, district coordinators, school management and teachers. For each of the themes and issues raised in the multimedia story, the PowerPoint contained slides that highlighted the research evidence. The report contained the detailed research findings.
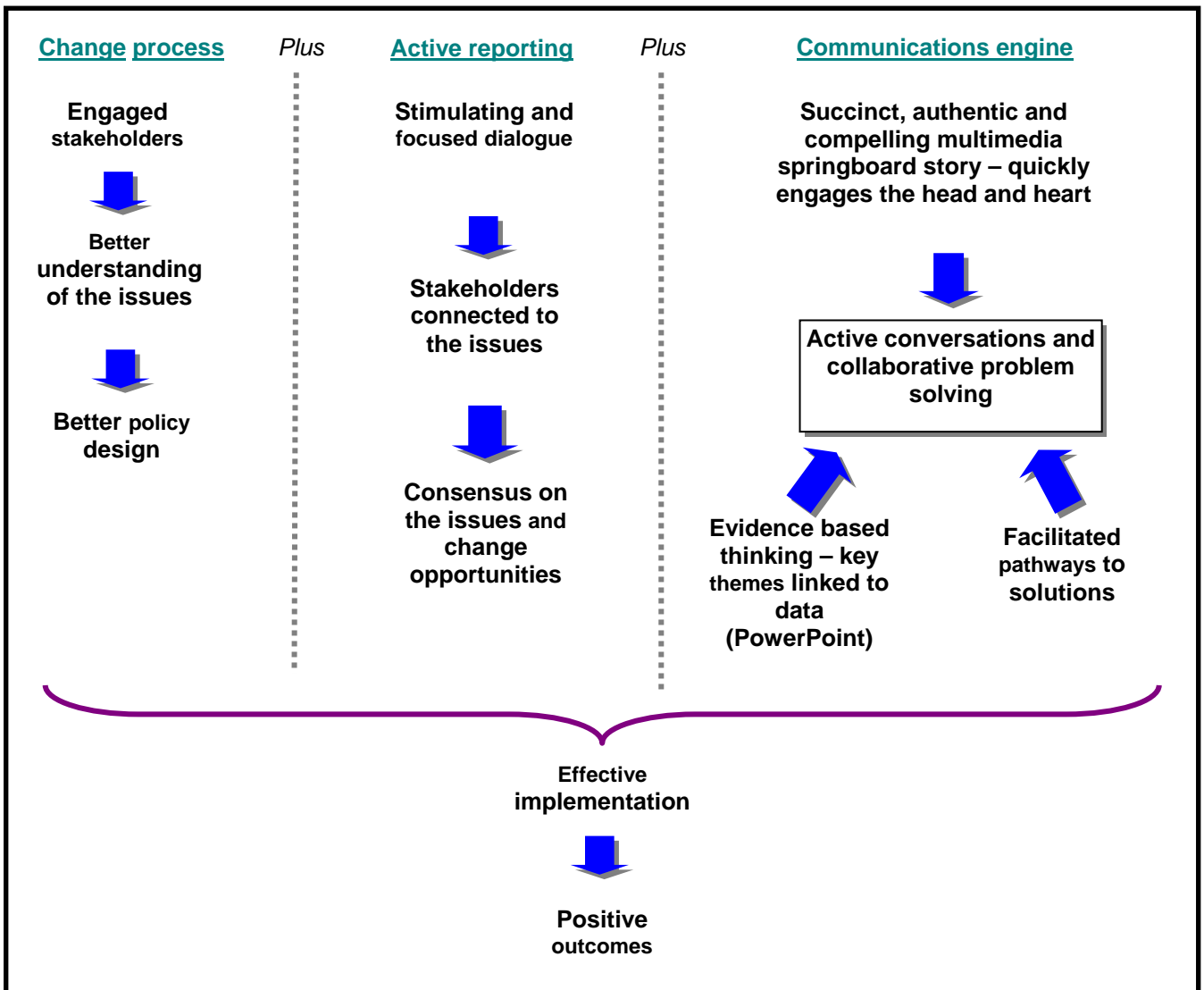
Conceptual background

The use of SBMM in communicating evaluation findings has its roots in:

υ   communications and learning theory in particular:

  υ   the ability of SBMM to assist audiences to make "personal cognitive connections" with the findings

  υ   the proposition that communicating themes is easier in stories because of their connection to real experience

  υ   the concept of springboard story(s)[5] in the thematic analysis of data and the ability of story about actual experience to connect stakeholders with what is happening on the ground

υ   behavioural change theory – engaging the head and heart is a key foundation for involvement and ownership of the opportunities for improvement

υ   emergent thinking on the role of the evaluator - the evaluator's experience is a valid and safe entry point for stakeholders and decision makers to work with the evaluation findings.

[5] Denning, S. (2000). *The Springboard – How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-era Organisation.* Butterworth: Heinmann.

These concepts underpin the active engagement framework that was the foundation for communicating the education initiative evaluation findings. The framework had three elements, a change process, an active reporting paradigm and a communications engine (refer Figure 1 for details).

Figure 1: Diagram of the engagement framework for selecting the multimedia tools

Change process   *Plus*   **Active reporting**   *Plus*   **Communications engine**

Change process	Active reporting	Communications engine
Engaged stakeholders	**Stimulating and focused dialogue**	**Succinct, authentic and compelling multimedia springboard story – quickly engages the head and heart**
↓	↓	↓
Better understanding of the issues	**Stakeholders connected to the issues**	**Active conversations and collaborative problem solving**
↓	↓	**Evidence based thinking – key themes linked to data (PowerPoint)** **Facilitated pathways to solutions**
Better policy design	**Consensus on the issues and change opportunities**	

Effective implementation
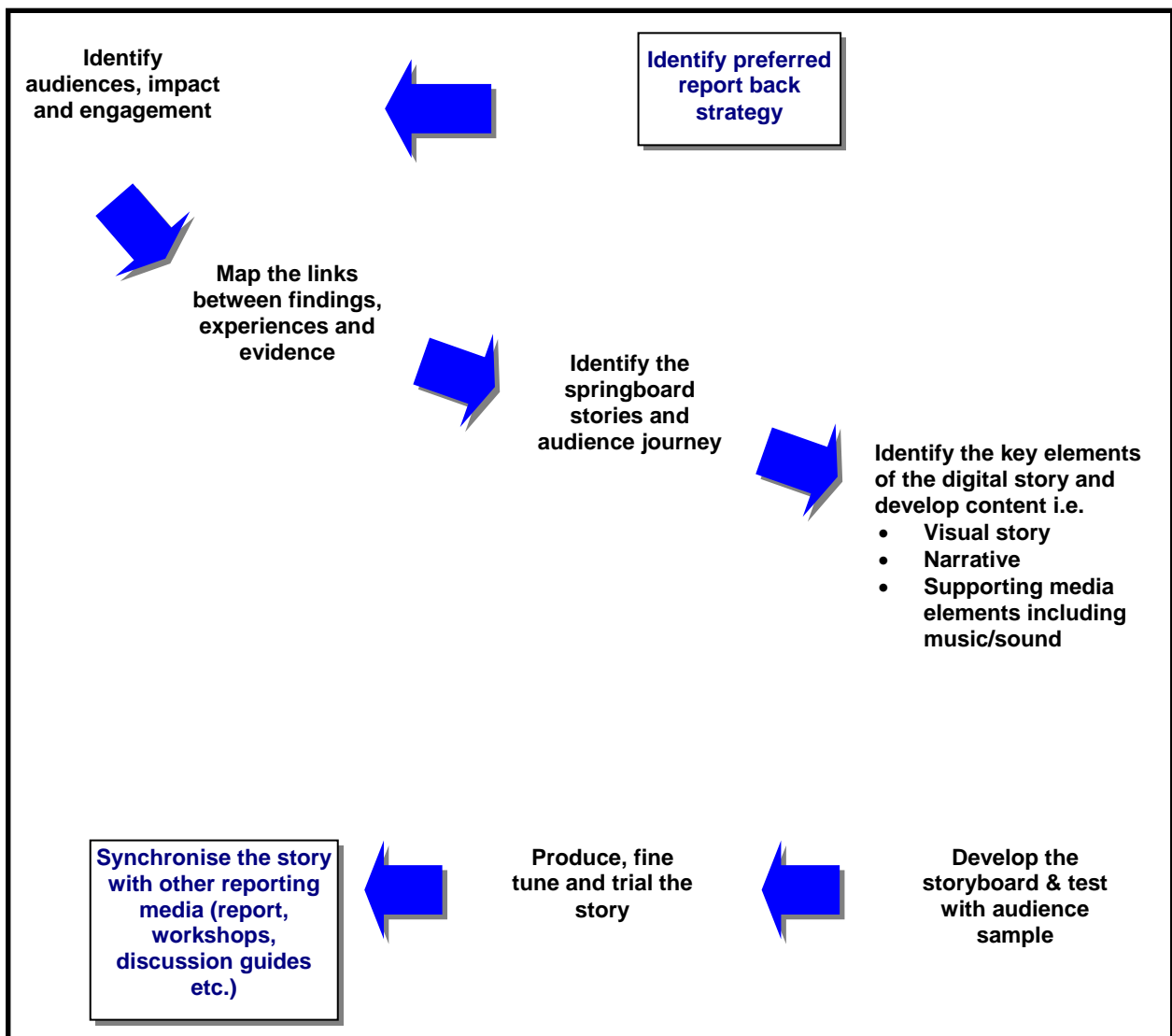
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Positive outcomes

Producing the evaluator's multimedia story

The production of the evaluator's multimedia story happened over four days. The evaluators were guided through a structured story development process by the facilitator of the production company *Storyworks*. Evaluators were "hands on" at all stages of the development process (refer Figure 2 below).

In developing the multimedia story, the evaluators clarified their findings and perceptions, debated the communications opportunities and made decisions about the style, content and audience. The *Storyworks* facilitator guided, challenged and provided an independent perspective against which the evaluators could test their ideas. The collaborative development of the multimedia story was an important aspect of the approach used to develop the story

Figure 2: Finding and producing the evaluator's multimedia story

Case Study - Supplementary Learning Support Evaluation

The Supplementary Learning Support (SLS) Evaluation was undertaken by Research New Zealand between 2004 and 2006. The Supplementary Learning Support initiative, Ministry of Education in New Zealand, established 224 part or full time learning support teachers between 2004-2006. The aim of the initiative was to assist selected students with special needs that did not meet existing high needs funding criteria, to achieve enhanced educational outcomes. The learning support teachers were located in host schools and worked with selected students.

The evaluation was undertaken alongside the initiative as the teaching positions were established in three instalments. The evaluation had four objectives:

υ   Allocation of SLS support – *was it equitable?*

υ   Collaboration – *did it occur, why and where?*

υ   Support for class teachers – *is this happening, how?*

υ   Support for students – *are they better able to make progress?*

The research showed that the students were making positive progress with an increase in both their presence at school and in their participation. The improvement in the students' learning outcomes was evident, and with time and refinements to the role of the teachers, these learning outcomes will be able to be enhanced.

The reporting of the evaluation included the following three components:

1. The multimedia story (using SBMM), was seven minutes long and used images, text, music and a narrative to outline the evaluator's findings and the analysis. The multimedia story highlighted the key issues, provided some solutions and concluded with a call to action. Real voices and images of teachers and students involved in the SLS initiative were used in the story.

2. The PowerPoint presentation then provided the evidence base for the key findings and the highlighted issues. Graphs, quotes and tables were used in the slides to back up the story.

3. The report was detailed and provided the full methodology, profiles for the case studies and other quantitative and qualitative findings and information. The executive summary of the report was disseminated with the multimedia story to the wider group of stakeholders i.e. schools and regional Ministry of Education offices.

Summary

As a consequence of using SBMM in communicating the evaluation findings, the evaluators noted:

υ   an active engagement of stakeholders

υ   that the multimedia story and PowerPoint worked well together

υ   that the PowerPoint presentation provided the key evidence base for issues raised in the multimedia story.

υ   the level of debate between key stakeholders was focused on issues

υ   positive feedback was received on the impact of the multimedia story from key stakeholders.

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