

The roles of the evaluator as objective observer and active participant. Are they mutually exclusive?

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Abstract:

Evaluations have traditionally been used by funding bodies and others to justify the acquittal of funds at the conclusion of a project or to assess the project in terms of meeting a program's objectives. An alternative view sees evaluations as participative processes where the direction of project activities is influenced, good practices are supported and promoted and the ongoing development of strategic policy is informed. This is the approach being used by Charles Darwin University in the Northern Territory to evaluate Domestic and Family Violence intervention projects in remote Indigenous contexts. The paper's authors have been directly involved in the design and implementation of the evaluations, which are in various stages of progress.

This paper explores the methodological basis for this approach, drawing on relevant evaluation literature, with a particular emphasis on the role of the evaluator as both observer and participant. It briefly reviews the literature on participant versus 'objective' roles, then uses the projects outlined above as a case study.

The question that the paper poses—and the central purpose of the presentation—is to ask if it is possible to conduct an evaluation of this kind as both an engaged participant and an objective observer. If so, how can the two seemingly mutually exclusive roles be brought together? What are the benefits of such a position and what are the drawbacks? The paper comes out in favour of the dual role, posing a number of benefits of the dual role for both researchers and their contractors.

Introduction

Evaluations have traditionally been used by funding bodies and others to justify the acquittal of funds at the conclusion of a project or to assess the project in terms of meeting a program's outcomes. This might be considered to be an 'objective' evaluation. An alternative view is of evaluations as participative processes. Through the participation, the direction of project activities can be influenced, good practices can be supported and promoted and the ongoing development of strategic policy can be informed. This is the approach being used by Charles Darwin University (CDU) in the Northern Territory to evaluate a suite of Domestic and Family Violence projects funded jointly by the Australian and Northern Territory governments. The paper's authors have been directly involved in the design and implementation of the evaluations, which are in various stages of progress. Evaluations conducted on this basis are sometimes criticised for not being objective. However, a further role for the CDU team is to provide an external evaluation of the projects. In this role the evaluators are expected to offer impartial advice to the funding body about the effectiveness of the interventions and how well they have achieved their stated objectives. This paper explores the methodological basis for these evaluator roles, drawing on relevant evaluation literature.

Literature review

The literature reviewed here first addresses some of the many approaches to evaluation. It then goes on to more specifically consider participative approaches to evaluation and the ways that purpose drives evaluation design.

Approaches to evaluation design and the evaluator role

At one level evaluation design methods can be viewed dichotomously. That is they are either formative or summative. The summative approach can be viewed as an exercise 'to determine the overall effectiveness or impact of a programme or project' while the formative approach is designed to 'support the processes of improvement' (Clarke 1999:7-8). Proponents of 'empowerment evaluations' (e.g. Fetterman and Wandersman 2005, 2007) take this a step further, arguing that such evaluations are not just participatory but can be used to 'foster improvement and self-determination' (Fetterman 2005:10). In summative evaluations, the evaluator is considered to be independent and in participatory and empowerment evaluations the evaluator will have an engaged, interactive role. However this dichotomy is not the only way of considering approaches to evaluation. Evaluators can take on the role of 'scientific expert', 'independent auditor' or 'consultative facilitator'. Patton (2000) suggests that this third role can be described in terms of 'utilization-focused evaluation' where the evaluator is the negotiator. He suggests that in this scenario 'all roles are on the table just as methods are

options. Markievicz (2005) suggests that this negotiation role is important for resolving multiple and potentially conflicting stakeholder interests. Role selection follows from and is dependent on intended use by intended users' (p. 430).

Stufflebeam's CIPP (Context, Input, Process and Product) Evaluation Model offers yet another way to consider different types of evaluations. Rather than trying to distinguish between types, Stufflebeam integrates formative and summative evaluation methods with an 'improvement focus', effectively doing away with the apparent dichotomy (Stufflebeam and Shinkfield 2007). This kind of integration can however also be achieved within a framework of empowerment or participatory evaluation design. Suarez and Harper (2003) for example, show how a focus on outcomes can be merged successfully in a utilitarian approach to provide both objective assessment of a program's effectiveness and subjective and substantive improvement within a program. The evaluators in that example saw themselves as 'partners' with the program staff.

There are very good reasons for integrating methods and approaches in evaluation. Rao and Woolcock (2003) suggest that well-integrated evaluation methods, including qualitative and quantitative tools, enable generalisations to be made from findings, and 'that the strengths of one approach potentially complement the weaknesses of the other' (p. 168). Falk and Guenther (2007) contend that a rigorous qualitative or mixed methodological approach may produce findings that are no less generalisable than those which are based on quantitative methods.

Tensions for evaluators

Central to the implications of the above examples of evaluation approaches is a question often posed: 'how can participatory evaluations remain objective and give unbiased findings when the evaluators are so actively engaged in the process?'. At what point does the outsider become an insider? Is it possible to maintain an appropriate balance of objectivity and subjectivity when formative and summative approaches are merged? Others have grappled with the same issues and have acknowledged the potential for conflict of interest and ethical compromise (Conley-Tyler 2005; Caracelli 2006; Yang and Shen 2006). A further challenge when multiple approaches are blended is to maintain the integrity of each approach when they may at times be at odds with each other. For example, does a participatory method adversely impact on the results of empirically based findings (Bledsoe and Graham 2005)? These kinds of tensions are frequently reported by evaluators—particularly those that are conducted in isolated and culturally distinct communities, such as Indigenous communities in Australia (Scougall 2006). Despite the many questions and potential pitfalls, it is evident from a scan of the literature that program evaluations do use participative approaches and they are used for a variety of purposes. Rosas (2006:102) for example, suggests that it is possible to 'maintain a high level of ethical behavior but also exhibit transparency in the methodological approach' by applying 'specific strategies in support of guiding principles and standards'.

The purpose of evaluations

Given the above discussion about various approaches to evaluation the purpose of evaluations is an important consideration for the design of any evaluation. At one level evaluations are used for assessing program outcomes, typically using program logic models to determine: success of interventions (Patton 2002; W.K. Kellogg Foundation 2004); 'effectiveness and efficiency' (Stevens 2005); what works and why, to inform the formative development of policy and practice (Dawe 2003). While the evaluators themselves may have a role in designing the method of an evaluation, to a large degree the purpose of any evaluation is determined more by the commissioning organisation than by any single methodological approach (Chelimsky 2007). In the case of internal evaluations, where the purpose of evaluation may be driven by an organisation's need to improve professional practice or quality a 'community of practice' approach may be warranted (Wenger 1998). In the case of this latter purpose, the 'community' itself determines the purpose.

Illustrative case of evaluations where internal and external roles are expected

A case example of a suite of project evaluations conducted in the Northern Territory serves to illustrate the tensions that can exist for evaluators faced with multiple roles. The example points to some of the considerations that may need to be taken into account for others where evaluators are required to play dual roles as insiders and outsiders.

A suite of evaluations of eight trial domestic violence interventions is being conducted by Charles Darwin University across the Northern Territory. These evaluations are in various stages of completion. The interventions are being managed as projects and are due for completion within the next twelve months. CDU has been involved as an evaluator for the last 15 months. Each intervention has a different sized budget allocation for the evaluation, reflecting the size of the projects themselves. The largest three projects require reasonably

intensive evaluation processes over an extended period of time. The CDU evaluation team consists of up to five individuals with specific skills in reflective practice, data management, theoretical understanding of the issues, local cultural knowledge and experience in a range of research and evaluation practices.

Roles of the CDU team

The CDU team performs several different functions within the scope of these evaluations. These are outlined below.

1. Developing scope of work documents cooperatively with the NT government

The initial consultation phase of the evaluations involved an extensive negotiation of the research parameters. This was done on the one hand cooperatively with the funding body and yet separately from the project teams. In this initial phase of the evaluation process the CDU team could be seen as an 'insider' with the funding body, yet as an 'outsider' to the project teams. However, within the parameters of the scope of works the role of the evaluator as an objective researcher, as a vehicle for capacity building and as a facilitator of change and critical reflection was clearly defined. These clear definitions and statements of intent provided the evaluators with the necessary permission to engage with stakeholders in dual roles of 'insider' and 'outsider'.

2. Conducting data collection activities and designing data management tools

Approaches to data collection for these evaluations followed traditional approaches to research where the University's protocols and ethical procedures for conducting (mainly qualitative) research were adhered to. The role of the evaluator in these traditional processes is to be objective, gathering data and analysing the data in a systematic way. While tools for quantitative data recording were developed cooperatively with project team members, the role of the CDU team as defined by the scope of works was to analyse the data and report findings to the funding body, while the role of the project teams was to gather the data. The evaluator has played a quality assurance role with the project teams ensuring the validity and accuracy of the data. This again is the role of an 'outsider'.

3. Engaging with stakeholders about project activities and processes

One of the purposes of the evaluation as defined in the scope of work documents for the evaluations was to build capacity among the project team members through reflective practice workshops and through informal review sessions. In these instances the CDU team has played the role of a critical friend, offering feedback and support. This required an element of trust and cooperation between the evaluation team and the project teams. At other times the evaluator has played the role of a neutral negotiator, offering a space for divergent views to be discussed, debated and effectively heard. These processes require more than an objective or passive role—it is the role of an engaged 'insider'.

4. Developing outcomes based frameworks

Part of the process described above, included the cooperative development of an outcomes based framework. Each project had predefined Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) associated with funding agreements and while the KPIs were not negotiable, the ways to measure them were. Further, consistent with principles of participatory practices, utilisation and ownership of these measures was important for the organisations involved. For the evaluator, the process of supporting the development of an outcomes based framework, with these goals in mind, has taken time and a reasonably intimate knowledge and understanding of the goals and vision of the organisation. In the process 'insider' relationships have formed.

5. Reporting and feedback to the funding body

All stakeholders in the evaluations were aware that the evaluation team was required to report back to the funding body. While this may appear to have placed the evaluator in a sandwiched position between funding body and project teams, it has provided a useful means for project stakeholders to engage with the evaluators as an insider 'ally'. At the same time the project stakeholders understood that feedback would be filtered by ethical and confidentiality constraints, which gave them some degree of anonymity and protection and gave them an opportunity to present their views to a neutral third party. The same applied in reverse.

How has the evaluation team maintained dual roles as objective observers and engaged partners?

The CDU team has been challenged by the reality that its role in these evaluations is complex. On the one hand, in order to get the kind of data needed to critically assess the interventions an intimate knowledge of the activities and context in which they occur was required. It could be argued that this can only be achieved by becoming an 'insider', forming trusted professional relationships that facilitate free and open exchange of ideas and knowledge. The team has recognised that building these relationships is a complex and time consuming process that cannot be achieved simply by deciding to build trust. On the other hand, the team has recognised that the funding body require an objective assessment of the outcomes, processes and lessons learned for the possible future replication of the projects. This has required them to be more of a dispassionate 'outsider'. To ensure these potentially conflicting roles did not compromise the evaluation, the team has adopted a number of practices, which are outlined below.

1. Ensuring that project team members understand the role of the evaluation team

Before engaging in any evaluation activities, members of the CDU team negotiated the respective roles of the evaluators and project team members to ensure that there would be no confusion about the functions. The project stakeholders understood the reporting requirements and intention of the evaluation before embarking on data gathering activities. While this strict division of roles did not preclude the possibility that trusting relationships could be formed, it did mean that the differing 'insider' and 'outsider' roles were mutually recognised and understood during the evaluation.

2. Separating some of the roles within the evaluation team

The CDU team brought in specialists to the evaluation as required. For example, a person not involved with data gathering has been used to conduct reflective practice workshops. The evaluation's project manager was not directly involved in any research tasks and could, if required, play an exclusively 'outsider' role both for the funding body and the project teams.

3. Maintaining ethical standards

The CDU team has recognised the importance of adhering to ethical standards for research. The team has adopted the AES guidelines for evaluation (Australasian Evaluation Society Inc. 2006) and the NHMRC guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Human Research (NHMRC et al. 2007) along with the AIATSIS ethics guidelines (The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies 2000). Conformance to the combination of these standards and guidelines has provided a basis for ensuring that regardless of the role taken, research and evaluation conducted has been carried out in such a way as to ensure confidentiality, privacy, respect for individuals and culture and that work carried out was beneficial, equitable and just. The guidelines also ensure that the evaluator has behaved in a neutral and impartial manner.

4. Responding to the needs of *all* stakeholders

While clearly the funding body set out the purpose of the project evaluations—and the CDU team is required to report back to the funding body—the roles agreed to in the scope of works allowed the evaluation team to engage with some degree of freedom to a) build capacity of the project teams; b) provide them with critical reflection; c) offer external insights and impartial observations about process, outcomes and activities; and d) respond to specific requests for support. Further, there have been instances where the evaluators have been asked to fill the role of negotiator within subgroups of the project teams, for example liaising between government and non-government stakeholders.

Discussion

The illustration provides an example of how the role of an evaluator may be both that of an insider and that of an outsider. But is this dual role compromising the effectiveness of the evaluation in terms of reporting back to the funding body or in terms of supporting project teams to incrementally improve their programs? While there can be little doubt about the efficacy of engagement in the evaluation processes, the questions in the literature about whether or not participative approaches compromise the validity of the evaluation outcomes may well be posed here. In order to answer this question we first need to consider what the purpose of these

evaluations is. If the purpose was simply to assess the success or failure of the strategies and interventions being evaluated, then they would most probably be considered unreliable. However, given that the purpose of the evaluations was to develop policy and practice the methods provide an appropriate way of satisfying the NT Governments requirements. Given this purpose, having an evaluator that has in-depth understandings of the relationships and inner workings of the project teams can indeed support the interpretation and reporting of objective data gathered for summative purposes. Furthermore, given also that the evaluations enhance the learnings of the stakeholders through participatory and reflective practices the resulting contributions to the development of strategies and intervention practices add value to the evaluation outputs.

Returning to the central question posed in the Introduction: 'Are the roles of the evaluator as objective observer and active participant mutually exclusive?' the case offers some insights that may help answer this question.

First, it should be noted that the evaluators do not rely solely on the subjective responses from the project participants. They draw on a variety of internal and external sources. *Second*, the degree to which the findings are considered 'objective' is dependent to some extent on the end user of the evaluation outputs. Just because a summative evaluation draws on 'objective data', does not mean that it is perceived that way by those who use the evaluation findings. The converse can be equally true of formative evaluation findings using qualitative methods, which have been used in the case cited. *Thirdly* an important point to note in considering this question is that the role of the evaluators in both cases is not to report *favourable* outcomes to the NT Government. Rather, in both cases the dual role of the evaluators as objective and dispassionate researchers and active co-participants is to facilitate processes that support the shared learnings (that might be considered 'good' or 'bad') which emerge. In so doing, the evaluators will provide the NT government with recommendations for improving policy and practice. Taking into account this role for the given purposes of the evaluations the potential for ethical and/or practical conflicts of interests pose few problems, provided that appropriate 'guiding principles and standards' (Rosas 2006) are maintained. *Fourthly*, given the nature of these evaluations a counter question may be 'is it necessary to be totally objective?'. If objectivity is meant to allow great external clarity of vision on what is really going on, then why should this be the case when the evaluator cannot possibly know what is really going on? It is conceivable that a greater difference can be made using participative processes because the evaluators (a) really do know 'the good and bad of it all', and (b) have policy people engaged so they can hear and act on the emerging critiques.

Conclusion

The illustration highlighted in this paper demonstrates how evaluator roles can be managed to offer both an objective summative evaluation and a participative formative evaluation. We argue that the 'insider' and 'outsider' roles are not substantially compromised using these strategies. An important factor that contributes to the efficacy of this approach in this context is the acceptance of the role of the evaluator by all stakeholders as both an impartial and objective observer and an engaged participant. Supporting this role is a directed purpose that demands that the evaluator provides impartial recommendations while at the same time supporting change processes that form policy and practice. The evaluations are not designed to produce a pass/fail report card for the participating programs based on purely external and predetermined measures. Rather they are designed to build constructive outcomes based on shared learnings that take place in a cooperative and consultative environment. We argue that it is possible to conduct a formative evaluation that is objective based on the strength of the methodology, the standards applied to the evaluation and the demands of the intended audience.

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