From Anecdote to Evidence: a model for rigorous integration of qualitative information in evaluations

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One of the greatest frustrations of program providers and others close to the consumer interface is that the insights that they are privy to on a regular basis just do not seem valued in the traditional evaluation design. As evaluators we also share the frustration of writing in the wonderful anecdotes that have such meaning but are often regarded as "only anecdotal". Yes, we always ensure that they are recorded and quoted in our work; indeed they may often provide that wonderful quote that becomes the title of our report or a chapter. But there must be more!

This paper presents a model that enables the identification and systematic collection of anecdotal evidence in an on-going theory-building process. The process assesses and validates anecdotes in a way that supports program improvement and clarification by the service deliverers and has the potential to inform a wider and deeper understanding of the program achievements beyond the more readily measurable outputs and outcomes.

As evaluators we are well schooled in, and indeed supportive of, evidence-based evaluation. We agree that our judgments must be built on credible data that can be scrutinized by others in order to determine how and why we have made sense of an issue or situation. We also know of the conventional hierarchy of evidence with the so-called 'hard' data holding the highest place in the evidence food chain; such quantitative, empirical and typically numerical data brings with it the implicit assumption that data that can be converted to numbers will be the most objective and thus rigorous. Typically anecdotal evidence is placed at the very bottom of the evidence hierarchy.

We do see anecdotal evidence in evaluation reports, albeit often inserted into an evaluation report framed in an almost apologetic way – for example "Whilst only anecdotal, some consumers find this program is different to previous health education they have experienced '*this group of staff seem to understand our situation and know how hard it is for families in [town name](single mother of two)*". Or anecdotes are used to add colour to a report by utilising and reflecting the language of the informants —"*well, I wouldn't have gone to [service name] if my best friend hadn't come with me; most places think we are just drop-kicks so we always rock up together (homeless adolescent, aged 14*)". This type of anecdote is presented as a 'quotable quote' inserted in the relevant thematic section that has emerged from the 'main' data analysis process. Perhaps the pinnacle of success for an anecdote is when it is selected as part of the report title! : More than 'just drop-kicks: an evaluation of XXX service for homeless youth"

Whilst most evaluators do collect and use anecdotes in these ways, little more is done with them. However when we talk with grassroots workers or direct service providers it is often the anecdotes that they value and want to foreground. When an evaluator then says "but that's just anecdotal, we must get hard data as well" a rift between service informants and the evaluator can emerge. In the worst case scenario, the apparent focus of the evaluator on other data leaves direct service providers with an uneasy sense that this evaluator doesn't really get it and is over-

privileging less meaningful data and, in the worst case, a lack of confidence in the ultimate findings of the evaluation can result. However people remember anecdotes and share anecdotes for a reason—there is some depth of meaning apparent to the teller and this is what we, as evaluators, must harness.

Stepping back from the anecdote itself, we need to acknowledge that evidence is drawn from a constructed reality, rather than an objective, fixed reality. Truth and meaning are not fixed or inherent in a definitive external reality but are constructed from evolving dialogues and discourses specific to a particular socio-cultural and temporal location. And it is that very dynamic that makes anecdotal evidence exciting as it has the potential for us to explore and understand the meaning making resources that a given group of people may draw upon. When we then engage with the diverse range of stakeholder groups available to us, we gain access to multiple perspectives and knowledges relevant to a given evaluation question and context. To truly understand a system or situation, we must also recognize that each stakeholder group can only have a part of the picture. This does not mean that as evaluators we will give equal weight to every perspective in the final analysis, however we must ensure that each perspective is given equal exploration and visibility.

There are some voices that may initially only be heard through 'just an anecdote'. As such there is also an ethics underpinning the project of harnessing the power of anecdotes as this type of evidence typically comes from client or consumer voices. Professionals are usually well-versed, even over-schooled, in sharing explicit or codified knowledge and have the language and strategies to ensure their perspectives are acknowledged. In contrast, consumer /client groups often need facilitative structures to name and share their tacit or experiential knowledge. Social justice principles remind us to take note of marginalized or silenced voices and to deliberately seek the diverse realities of daily lived experience in our analysis.

By developing a rigorous process of collecting and analyzing anecdotes there is a real potential to surface new and emerging ways of seeing and knowing that may not yet be visible or readily available to the staff and the evaluator. Developing a framework for the collection and analysis of anecdotes can become a dynamic process of mutual learning and situated learning. At its heart this becomes an on-going process of theory building.

The Anecdote to Evidence Model

In order to illustrate the model[1], let me use the hypothetical youth centre I have written about in a previous work[2]. The overall mission of this Youth Health Centre (YHC) is to provide a supportive and proactive environment for marginalized young people who are not accessing mainstream services and who are 'at risk'. The YHC works on a youth friendly participative model[3] providing opportunistic education, medical services and referral. The YHC has developed a Program Logic framework and routinely collects evaluation data on a number of key performance indicators (measuring activities, reach, referrals and the like).

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[1] I am grateful to the staff of the Pacific Children's Project for their contribution to the initial development of this model during the Monitoring and Evaluation workshop in Fiji 2006

[2] Pamphilon, B "The Community Youth Case Study: is that all there is?" in Kayrooz, C. & Trevitt, C. (2005) *Research in Organisations and Communities: tales from the real world,* Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest

[3] see http://www.youth.nsw.gov.au/youth_workers/youth_participation for resources on best practice youth participation

Given the ‘at risk’ behaviours of the client group the YHC aims to see longer term changes but the opportunity to measure these are limited as the client group is transient and difficult to follow-up. Therefore the staff had abandoned any idea of measuring long term changes and focused on the activity and output dimension of their work. Despite not being able to validate this, the staff do believe that their service is leading to longer-term change. Staff had been appending anecdotes to their quarterly reports to the funding body and were concerned about the feedback that these were ‘just anecdotes’. This sets the scene to illustrate the ‘Anecdote to Evidence’ process.

The meaning-making process begins with a staff workshop— the aim of the workshop is to surface the collective knowledge and interpretations of the anecdotes found within this group of experienced staff. As stated earlier there is a reason that an anecdote is remembered: it has significance, it means something to the person, it has been remembered because it says something.

Staff are asked to bring anecdotes from previous reports and from their recent experience with the young people. It is useful to have each anecdote written on a separate piece of paper for ease of discussion and analysis. The discussion process begins in pairs who determine a heading/theme for each anecdote. Where possible like anecdotes can be clustered. This process can be sequentially repeated in larger and larger groups – 2 pairs become a 4 then two 4s become an 8. In this way the group is developing a simple but effective collaborative thematic analysis. At this point it is now possible to have a whole group display of themes/categories with a final whole-of-group sorting process determining which anecdotes initially belong in which category. The following table gives examples of what may have emerged from the YHC first sorting.

Table 1: Initial Group Sorting Process Example

Category	**Anecdote**	
Owning own behaviour	Young male (13) explaining why he’s at the YHC on a different day —“I f**ed up, the soccer coach has kicked me out of the team for 2 weeks”	Young female (14)—talking about a fight with another girl —“I was just over it and she pushed me too far, but I was over it that day”
Changing values	Group shopping trip to the supermarket for supplies for the cooking class “ Group comments: 1/ “Yeh we didn’t knick anything this time did we!” 2/ X being told by the others “she’d better stay out of trouble because we want to do this cooking stuff”	
Gender Discrimination	Young female (15) came second in the pool competition	Graffiti on health posters– mostly just moustaches and glasses
Enhanced peer education and learning	Girl telling another girl “you’re not a slut – you have the right to have sex with who you want, just don’t let him get you pregnant”	Girls telling a pregnant peer that she should “watch out for grog now” –and explaining how alcohol can affect a baby so that they “look different and their brains are different”
Seeing a future	Young male school drop-out (15) discussing possible apprenticeships and how to get in without a Year 10 Certificate	Young female (14) wanting to know who might help her Mum with her drug use because she might go home if there was someone for her Mum

The most important part of the process is the facilitated analytical discussion of "what does each anecdote and category tell us 1/ immediately about our work and 2/ about indications of change". This last question is particularly pertinent as in settings where long-term change may not be measurable we need to be developing our own 'theory of change" that can inform further development of our work. The facilitation of this discussion is a key role for the insightful evaluator.

The analytical discussion should be led in a way that enables participants to acknowledge that each anecdote contains a number of levels of analysis. The macro level reveals socio-cultural discourses that may be taken up by the participants; for example in the YHC scenario young people may already be understanding themselves as 'addicts' rather than 'someone finding the wrong solution for a real problem'. The meso level reveals individual agency as the analysis looks for the narratives/stories that are constructed by different people to make sense of their own actions/life: for example a young person may move from an isolated 'me against the world' storying towards an openness to some support and guidance. Finally the interactional level makes visible the meaning making that arises from relationships between peers and staff; showing how a service and system can provide a setting and processes for meaningful dialogue and potential learning. The following table illustrates the analytical stage in the YHC scenario.

Table 2: Anecdote Analysis Example

Category	**Anecdote and Analysis**	
Owning own behaviour	Young male (13) explaining why he's at the YHC on a different day —"I f**ed up, the soccer coach has kicked me out of the team for two weeks"	Young female (14)—talking about a fight with another girl —"I was just over it and she pushed me too far, but I was over it that day"
	Analysis: not blaming others, especially those in authority roles	Analysis: not blaming others; taking responsibility for feelings
Changing values	Group shopping trip to the supermarket for supplies for the cooking class " Group comments: 1/ "Yeh we didn't knick anything this time did we!" 2/ X being told by the others "she'd better stay out of trouble because we want to do this cooking stuff"	
	Analysis: Previously the group thought it was smart to shoplift and would brag to staff of what they had knicked; rules were agreed, but until this time had not been adhered to.	
Gender Discrimination	Young female (15) came second in the pool competition	Graffiti on health posters–mostly just moustaches/glasses
	Analysis: until this time boys had harassed girls so much they wouldn't enter the comp.	Analysis: no longer misogynist or homophobic
Enhanced peer education and learning	Girl telling another girl "you're not a slut – you have the right to have sex with who you want, just don't let him get you pregnant"	Girls telling a pregnant peer that she should "watch out for grog now" –and explaining how alcohol can affect a baby so that they "look different and their brains are different"
	Analysis: impact of recent 'girls only' groups	Analysis: flow-on from staff/youth informal discussions on alcohol and Fact Sheets around the YHC

Seeing a future	Young male school drop-out (15) discussing possible apprenticeships and how to get in without a Year 10 Certificate	Young female (14) wanting to know who might help her Mum and her drugs use because she might go home if there was someone for her Mum
	Analysis: young man previously would avoid all discussions on futures or school	Analysis: young woman had been feeling hopeless about her future and was always angry about her family

From the analysis, the staff have started to identify the socio-cultural collective dimensions apparent in the anecdote by asking "what are dominant discourses that may be taken up by that young person" and "how do they enable, constrain or affect their ways of seeing their own life and agency". They have identified individual themes that have been constructed by the person in order to forge some coherency from their lived experience and they are alerted to indicators of growthful change[4]. This data is now much more than anecdotes.

It is important that both these initial findings and the theory building process then be integrated in the on-going evaluation practices. Staff should be supported to develop a framework for the targeted routine collection of anecdotes and other change indicators across agreed categories and to identify priority areas for further data collection and needed analysis on emerging theoretical concepts.

Conclusion

Whist I have used an example from a client-focused service where staff undertake the analysis, the model also can be used in other settings such as organisations or team projects and can involve multiple stakeholders in the theory building. The 'Anecdote to Evidence' process complements a results-based evaluation model[5] which aims to define realistic expected results, monitor performance of outputs and progress towards outcomes, as well as to evaluate the outcomes, impact (or longer-term outcomes) and lessons learned. Further it is highly compatible with empowerment evaluation[6] as it provides a process in which all levels of stakeholders can engage in collaborative dialogue and mutual meaning-making. Essentially it is a form of outcomes monitoring as it seeks to identify early indicators of change and provides a reflection process that enables attributability of emergent change.

As practitioners we know that evaluation is not, and cannot be seen as, a neutral activity – from the design of our questions to our choices about who and how to consult, we make decisions about whose knowledge counts and how. However we do not always ask the question 'why' does this knowledge count above others. To me, the only wrong answer to this question would be "this evidence counts because it can be easily quantified and it is not just anecdotal!"

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[4] for an application of this concept in narrative research see Pamphilon, B (2008) *Making the Best of Life: aged women's storying of lifelong learning*, VDM Verlag Dr Muller, Saarbrucken

[5] Results-based monitoring and evaluation is defined as the measurement and assessment of performance in order to more effectively manage the outputs and outcomes or development results (UNDP (2002). Handbook on Monitoring and Evaluating for Results. United Nations Evaluation Office. http://www.undp.org/eo/documents/HandBook/part_1.pdf accessed 09/08/09

[6] see for example Fetterman D.(2001) "Foundations of Empowerment Evaluation", Sage Publications. London