**Progressing the Dialogue about a Framework for Aboriginal Evaluations:   
Sharing Methods and Key Learnings**

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*Aboriginal evaluation methodology is a relatively new construct. While much insight has been generated in recent years around conducting research among Aboriginal groups, little has been generated around evaluation methodologies. How are Aboriginal projects evaluated, by whom and for what purpose? What do Aboriginal people want evaluated and how might this be measured? How can non-Aboriginal evaluators effectively and respectfully respond to these issues in their evaluation of Aboriginal programs? This paper looks at the work of a number of recent Aboriginal evaluations conducted by BoysTown. It gives particular focus to the evaluation of a community-initiative employment program conducted in remote Western Australia which used a multi-faceted approach involving interviews, art and photovoice to capture how local people perceived the program’s strengths and weaknesses. Various techniques were also used to increase engagement, to hear the ‘voice’ of local people and make findings accessible to community members, program staff, government and other sectors. This paper will address the important cultural and community factors which influenced the evaluation design and subsequent implementation of findings. It will share key learnings in an attempt to progress a dialogue around shaping and developing a framework for conducting effective and collaborative evaluations with Aboriginal organisations and communities.*

**Introduction**

We would like to qualify that this paper represents the views of three non-Aboriginal evaluators, each with varied experience in evaluating programs and services involving Aboriginal people living in metropolitan, regional and remote communities of Australia[[1]](#footnote-1). Our aim is to offer reflexive practice, raising questions that have been asked of us but also acknowledging that we have much yet to learn. We have framed today’s presentation on what we believe are three key questions for all those involved with evaluations among Aboriginal communities in Australia. We reflect on these through reference to literature and our own experiences, particularly our learnings from working with a remote Aboriginal community in the Southern Kimberley region of Western Australia.

Whilst a number of existing frameworks already provide guidance for our work (Australasian Evaluation Society, 2010; AIATSIS, 2011; Orr, M., Kenny, P., Gorey, IN., Mir. A., Cox, E. & Wilson, J., 2009), these either focus on research rather than evaluation or they generalise across various and, often very different, communities and contexts. Our hope is that through shared reflexive practice we can help progress the development of a better framework for conducting effective, respectful, empowering and collaborative evaluations with Australia’s Aboriginal organisations and communities. Such a framework should undoubtedly be underpinned by the principles outlined in existing research guidelines. More than this however, we believe it should also be informed through reflection of the following questions:

1. How are evaluations targeted to Aboriginal people, by whom and for what purpose?
2. What do Aboriginal people want evaluated and how might this be better done?
3. How can non-Aboriginal evaluators effectively and respectfully respond to these issues?

**How are evaluations targeted to Aboriginal people, by whom and for what purpose?**

Too often we hear criticism that evaluations (and research) with Aboriginal communities are conducted by ‘outsiders’ who attempt to engage on a short, one-off basis, arriving with a predetermined agenda to extract specific ‘data’ without prior consultation and then leaving without any follow up around implementing possible recommendations or benefits for community. Or that often evaluations occur without locals seeing any change or improvement as a result of their efforts. It is no wonder that many Aboriginal people have been left feeling suspicious and disenfranchised with the evaluation process.

Evaluations can be perceived to come from ‘outside’ the community, outside their interests and control, based instead on funding bodies seeking to know that their monies have been spent well. This can lead to the disempowering and disengaging of local people. The questions local people seek to ask, the answers they wish to strengthen, can be ignored in the light of outsiders’ evaluation frameworks, funding priorities and values. Communities that have a long history of being disenfranchised can become more so, and key insights can be overlooked.

For example, when we went to evaluate a social enterprise program within a remote Aboriginal community we went in order to provide Government funding bodies with some quantitative evidence that the programs they were funding were effective in meeting contractual targets e.g. numbers of young men engaged in employment and training, attendance rates, number of houses built. However, as we came to know more of the inner workings of the program, we discovered qualitative evidence that shed new light on the quantitative data. Without the latter, the former would have been quite limited. It would have avoided engagement with the local community and the subsequent identification of new issues that community members identified as critically important to the success and sustainability of the program. One related to the culture of work and how some young men faced a number of obstacles in taking up full time work. Such insights offered the possibility of strategies that could begin to address key underlying issues facing the intention of the program. Thus in our experience it was important to bear in mind the evaluation questions ‘outsiders’ were asking as well as those asked by ‘insiders’.

In line with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) principles of research (AITSIS, 2011), the National Health and Medical Research Council’s (NHMRC) values and ethics guidelines (NHMRC, 2003) and others (Taylor, 2003, p47), we firmly support that in order to conduct ethical and respectful evaluations with Aboriginal people, consideration must be given to the ‘before’, ‘during’ and ‘after’ stages of the evaluation process. This includes upfront and ongoing consultation, negotiation and mutual understanding; ongoing respect, recognition and free and genuine involvement of Aboriginal people; and the delivery of a final product which is accessible and incorporates shared benefits for both parties, including giving back to the Aboriginal peoples in a way which responds to their needs and interests.

However, there remain a number of challenges for evaluators in implementing these principles. Literature (Spooner, Flaxman & Murray, 2008; Scougall, 2006) and our own experiences highlight these as most commonly being: the considerable time involved in establishing rapport and building trust with the Aboriginal people involved; the geographic distance of many Aboriginal communities; the costs associated with committing the necessary resources to the project; the lack of understanding about this matter by many funding bodies; and not least, the lack of cultural competence and contextual knowledge held by many evaluators.

As evaluators we need to recognise we are outsiders in the community and our actions before, during and after community visits. It is important to first seek permission to visit from Community Council or other key representatives and time needs to be allowed for this approval process to occur. Similarly, time and resources need to be committed to a multi-staged process, including multiple community visits. These timings need to be flexible, factoring in planned and unplanned cultural events and ceremonies as well as travel difficulties caused by weather and infrequent transport options.

In the example already mentioned, we incorporated four stages into our evaluation process, in an attempt to avoid the disenfranchising process of many predecessors, and to genuinely respect the phases of ‘before’, ‘during’ and ‘after’. This included three community visits, each involving about a week on-site and an additional week travelling to and from the community:

Stage 1: Seeking permission from local Council to visit; we cannot assume this permission.

Stage 2: A visit to provide background to the intended evaluation, introduce the evaluation team and seek input from locals on how they perceive the need for evaluation, how they would like the evaluation process to work (clarifying any issues around this and expressing a willingness to be flexible).

Stage 3: A visit to gather data and seek ongoing feedback about the evaluation process.

Stage 4: A visit to present the research findings to local stakeholder groups, disseminating copies of the report and allowing time for community members to reflect and provide feedback.

Fortunately in our instance we had a supportive management team committed to a respectful evaluation process. This is not typical however. Often the challenge is getting management and/or funding bodies to see value in and commit costs to the necessary time and resources required to build an evaluation relationship with the local community and key stakeholders. It is important however to get all funders to recognise this value if evaluations are to be based on consultation and trust and seriously attempt to evaluate according to the questions that those most involved wish to ask.

With regard to the issue of who should conduct evaluations among Aboriginal people, we recognise this issue is complex. Typically, the people who are most skilled at knowing whether and how programs work within their communities are community members. However, many communities lack the capacity or confidence to undertake evaluation, particularly around their own ways of seeing and understanding the particular project. Whilst it is our belief that evaluators themselves need not be Aboriginal, we believe that non-Aboriginal evaluators need to acknowledge that their cultural difference can present significant barriers to them fully and accurately interpreting the feedback and messages communicated by local Aboriginal people (Taylor, 2003; Wehipeihana, 2008, p42). Not just barriers in interpreting ‘local tongue’, but also interpretation of colloquialisms, non-verbal communication and local cultural practices.

Because of this inability for an ‘outsider’ to ever completely understand the specific cultural context of a community, we, like others, believe that engaging a local ‘sponsor’ with community knowledge and experience to work on the project is imperative. This ‘sponsor’ can provide the evaluator with guidance and translation around cultural norms and practices, and a ‘gateway’ to the community (Berends & Roberts, 2003; Taylor, 2003). If chosen wisely, the ‘sponsor’ should also be able to help build social capital and increase the legitimacy of the project (Spooner, Flaxman & Murray, 2008, p30). Of course, in choosing the ‘sponsor’ consideration must be given to who this is in order to avoid the potential for dominating voices or agendas (de Lancer Julnes as cited in Spooner, Flaxman & Murray, 2008, p30), causing political conflict between kinships or community members and/or not adhering to appropriate gender or local cultural protocols.

In our example, one of the authors had been known to the community for over 20 years, including many years living with the community as their local Parish Priest and later in Doctoral research in the region. He had rapport with a diverse range of community members and also shared an understanding of the local culture and language. Engaging him as ‘sponsor’ was a critical component of the evaluations success. Not only did it assist in engaging local people, particularly the men, but it helped guide culturally appropriate conduct for the evaluation, including an understanding around gift exchange, gender and conflict protocols and the community’s unique experience with colonisation and how this has influenced behaviour and attitudes today. The ‘sponsors’ involvement also ensured local voices could be more accurately understood and represented, particularly in the analysis of the findings. Moreover, it meant the process involved in developing relationships and rapport with community became significantly focused and supported.

Other program staff living in the community were also invaluable in helping one of the authors engage with local community members because of their existing relationships and rapport with community. In acknowledging the distinction between men’s and women’s business, it was appropriate to have a well-regarded female provide introduction to the local women. Of course there were still no guarantees that the local women would warm to the author personally, however having this link undoubtedly aided the process. The value of multiple site visits (and multiple interactions within each visit) became very apparent through engaging the local women. What began as seemingly quite silent, distant and disinterested interactions on behalf of the women, strengthened over time to become warm, open, engaging and rewarding interactions.

In relation to the purpose which evaluations should have, we share the view of Russell Taylor (2003, p46) that evaluators (and the evaluation process) should act as a ‘potential agent of change’ by providing communities with some benefit and empowering them and local organisations to initiate or continue positive change. This role can manifest itself through all stages of the evaluation, influenced by how and by whom the evaluation is conducted and particularly the evaluation reporting process.

Evaluation findings need to be delivered in a reporting format that is accessible and able to be utilised by all stakeholders, particularly the Aboriginal peoples involved. Quite often we, as evaluators, are required to prepare long, detailed reports for government and other funding bodies. However this format is not always of interest or accessible to all Aboriginal people, particularly for those where English is a second or third language. Thus, evaluators should consider preparing multiple reports which are tailored to various stakeholders. As part of this, consideration should also be given to the use of oral, visual and interactive reporting to provide a more engaging and typically more accessible report to community (Berends & Roberts, 2003, p58).

For our community evaluation we decided that two reports would be necessary – a report which comprehensively addressed each of the contractual key performance indicators (KPIs), plus a text and visual A3 colour book which described the community’s journey with the program, their thoughts on its effectiveness, outcomes they had recognised, challenges and future needs relating to the program. Like others (Tsey, 2000, p305), we found using the participants own words and/or personal narratives in the report was an effective way of not only helping ‘outsiders’ understand the real context but also encouraging participants to feel a sense of ownership and pride over the report. Copies of the colour book report were given to community to provide them with a permanent record of the journey and their own tool for learning, reflection and teaching (Tsey, 2000, p306).

One important aspect of ‘how’ and ‘who’ in which our evaluation did lack strength was in its inability to build evaluation skills and capacity within the local community. This was not due to our disregard for the strategy. To the contrary, we agree with the Australasian Evaluation Society and others (Wehipeihana, 2008, p42; Gray, Saggers, Drandich, Wallam & Plowright, 1995) that the opportunity for Aboriginal peoples to develop and strengthen their evaluation skills is important for encouraging shared ownership and benefit and project sustainability. In the past however, we, like others, have found this practice easier said than done, particularly when working with remote communities (Berends & Roberts, 2003, p57). Some of our biggest challenges have been overcoming an historical suspicion of evaluation by Aboriginal people, that this was ‘whitefella business’; the limited time available to establish relationships and develop skills; difficulties in knowing who to involve and how to seek interest; and a general uncertainty around the logistics of such an approach. Nonetheless, we firmly believe it is a mutually-beneficial strategy and one we intend to pursue in our follow-up evaluation with the same community.

**What do Aboriginal people want measured and how might this be measured?**

It is impossible to answer what Aboriginal people want measured in relation to a specific project without them being involved from the beginning, having some control over the process and investment in the results. Engaging in this dialogue is fundamental and is underpinned by both the AIATSIS principles (AIATSIS, 2010) and NHMRC value and ethics guidelines (NHMRC, 2033). Of course funding bodies and evaluation objectives must also play a role in determining the measures. However evaluators need to respect that some of these may be measures that Aboriginal people do not want used – either because they find them culturally insensitive, too intrusive or perhaps too complex and difficult to answer. In such cases, this should mean exploring alternative measures that will satisfy the needs of all those involved.

In relation to how to measure, we reiterate that multiple site-visits are critical to allow for adequate rapport building and contextual understanding. Beyond this however, we have learnt that evaluators should not be too prescriptive about particular methodologies at the project’s outset. Rather, the methodological approach needs to be flexible and tailored to the project, the key questions being asked and the people involved. Influenced by local stakeholders’ views on how they believe ‘data’ is best provided. This may mean being flexible around particular methodologies and choosing ones that engage critical issues. It may also mean educating funding bodies around the realities of ‘data’ and/or what participants believe is important to know and measure.

Both qualitative and quantitative data play a key role in telling a program’s story, and a challenge for evaluators is to use each to complement the other. The use of creative qualitative methods like art, music, games, role playing and other qualitative methods offer much value as they can be both descriptive and flexible (Berends & Roberts, 2003), providing depth and context to the numbers often sought by funding bodies. Similarly, statistics can provide objective baselines and comparison points from which change and improvement can be measured against.

In the example we have mentioned, we used a multi-faceted approach that involved analysis of program and community reports to provide the statistics, plus semi-structured interviews, art and photovoice to capture people’s thoughts and feelings about the program. As part of this latter process, both men and women were invited to draw or paint their ‘story’ of the program and then retell this story in their own words. Like Tsey (2000, p305), we found an important feature of this activity was allowing people time to reflect and tell their story, and in doing so helping participants become aware of the sometimes small but important changes the program had on their lives.

Our reason for choosing an art-based methodology was based on our knowledge of the community’s existing interest and comfort with this activity. The women who participated were already engaging in other art activities so our exercise simply became a voluntary extension of these sessions. After confirming local protocols in relationship to ownership of the art, we provided willing participants with the necessary art materials and invited them to take time to reflect and creatively express their feedback through drawing or painting. Others engaged in photovoice, using a camera to show what was important to them. The level of interest in these activities and the speed in which locals responded (i.e. overnight) was testament to the method’s effectiveness in this case.

With all our engagements, it was important for us to understand and respect local views and behaviours around different environments and spaces. Like Tsey (2000, p304), we recognised the importance of ensuring the environment in which the engagement took place was safe, supportive and informal. Beyond this though, we needed to understand that separate defined spaces within community existed for men, women, families etc. For example, when interviewing young Aboriginal men, many of whom were uncomfortable meeting and sitting down in a formal office, we chose more open spaces where they could more easily relax and chat. These were typically places where men would often gather to have a cuppa, and which were experienced as safe. For women, different spaces were used, specific to them.

**How can non-Aboriginal evaluators effectively and respectfully respond to these issues in their evaluation of Aboriginal programs?**

The evaluation took us on a pathway that strayed from the original evaluation plan and framework, requiring continuous learning from all stakeholders. There were interferences such as funding delays, a later-than-ideal commencement date and competing community agendas which all impacted on our ability to conduct the evaluation, in particular to build local evaluation capacity and to feedback the findings to community in a timely and complete manner. However, reflexive practices in the face of these barriers did allow the evaluation to proceed effectively and for the report to be disseminated to stakeholders. Through this process, there were a number of important learnings gained, including:

* The importance of ‘before’, ‘during’ and ‘after’, yet the challenges, often beyond our control, in truly respecting and implementing these stages, particularly as the evaluation is often viewed by community to be less important than the ebb and flow of their daily life;
* The need to allow ample time for the community to understand the evaluation purpose, identify and engage with the key evaluation questions, and for evaluator(s) to develop rapport with various community stakeholders and gain contextual knowledge;
* The criticality of engaging community members from the outset and through the assistance of a local ‘sponsor’. In doing so, evaluators can begin to gain cultural understanding and context. More importantly though, locals have a say in what, who, how and by whom evaluations impacting them occur, and how and if the findings will be used to benefit the community;
* The importance of using flexible and creative methods such as art and photovoice for gaining local views and allowing local voices to be clearly heard, and complementing these measures with quantitative data to provide funders a more thorough and holistic picture.
* The importance and need to educate funders up-front around realistic timings, cost, ‘data’ etc., and ultimately what is possible to achieve through an evaluation process.

Reflexive practices involve adaptability that assists the progression of evaluations in Aboriginal communities. By allowing flexibility in timing, engagement, data collection and results dissemination, the evaluation process becomes a journey that evaluators and the community can take together. Hence, reflexive practices become an underlying theme in the idea of a framework for evaluating programs targeted to Aboriginal peoples. Whilst it is very difficult to develop a specific framework that would be applicable to Aboriginal evaluations across Australia due to different local cultures and contexts, as a sector we need to continually engage in reflexive practices and give thought to how we can synthesize these learnings into a dialogue around appropriate and valuable evaluations and engagement with and among Aboriginal people.

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1. In this paper we use the word ‘Aboriginal’ rather than ‘Indigenous’ as the people we have worked with use, and prefer to use, this term. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)