

evaluation research

Evaluation research in Australasia: Moving forward

Evaluation research has now been a distinct and identifiable component of social programming in Australasia for over 30 years. In the early 1970s, only the eyes of a few had been opened and of these only a minority had more than a rudimentary understanding of what they could see. But for them, the concept and the vision were compelling and inspiring.

It was such a simple concept; to make our social programs maximally effective we needed to gather feedback information on their attainments, and then those responsible would make whatever adjustments were necessary so that the program goals would be achieved. The vision was compelling and inspiring because we all wanted to be part of a process that would lead to the eradication of poverty, all children reaching their educational potential and effective health care being delivered to all who needed it, and here was a straightforward way to help ensure that that would happen.

The evaluation studies undertaken in Australasia during this early period of the 'modern program evaluation' era were primarily guided by the experiences and writings of American evaluators, particularly, those of Stake, Stufflebeam, Scriven and Suchman. The broad sweep of Michael Scriven's conceptualisations was breathtaking and awe-inspiring, the meticulous attention to detail of Dan Stufflebeam was impressive and overwhelming, the down-to-earth commonsense of Bob Stake made it all seem doable, and Suchman put forward a persuasive and understandable integration of the evaluation process overall. Nevertheless, we still fell into the same traps for young players that the Americans had done, and in fact still were, and we mostly failed to fully appreciate the significant differences between program evaluation and social research more generally.

Challenge and change were at hand, however, with Stephen Kemmis and others bringing back from Britain the radical notions of a case-study approach and qualitative methods in evaluation. Spawned in the hotbed of left-wing evaluation radicalism at the University of East Anglia by Barry Macdonald, David Jenkins, David Hamilton and their colleagues, these ideas sparked intense debate between followers of the hard-nosed experimental/quasi-experimental and quantitative methods-oriented, American-inspired orthodoxy and their soft-nosed, earthy, British-inspired challengers.

By the mid- to late 1970s, while Bob Stake, a recent convert to evaluation using case study and qualitative methods, was playing largely a lone hand in the US with only limited effect, in Australia and New Zealand these so-called 'alternative' methods were widely accepted, in educational evaluation at least, as having a legitimate role. (Although it should be acknowledged that Bob Stake's weekend colloquium 'Case Study Evaluation in Britain and the Colonies' did cause a minor

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This is the text of Ralph's farewell Presidential address, delivered at the AES 2001 conference. Ralph continues to direct the Institute for Social Program Evaluation at Murdoch University.

ripple over the vast, flat plains of Illinois). Meanwhile, the Australian Schools Commission had institutionalised acceptance, and in fact encouragement, of a broadly ecumenical range of evaluation approaches and methods for their mandated evaluations, and the New Zealand Council for Educational Research and the Australian Council for Educational Research were using this range of alternatives, as were a number of others, in a variety of studies.

By 1979, the Senate Standing Committee on Health and Welfare, under the chairmanship of Senator Peter Baume, had completed an extensive two-and-a-half-year review of evaluation in Australian health and welfare services, publishing their findings in a report appropriately entitled *Through a Glass Darkly*. A major conclusion of their report was that 'in order to achieve an efficient, effective, rational and equitable health and welfare system, it is necessary to conduct ongoing evaluation' (p. 3). This report gave a major impetus to evaluation across the broad spectrum of our social programs, an impetus that was aided and abetted by the strong role undertaken initially by the Department of Finance (Marion Amies) to ensure that evaluation studies were done throughout government.

Since that time, evaluation has achieved both widespread legitimacy and an acceptance of its significant role in the processes of the development, implementation and delivery of social policies, programs and services within the public, not-for-profit and private sectors of Australia and New Zealand. This has involved a large degree of adaptation and accommodation, including the development and adoption of a variety of new and revised perspectives, procedures and practices. Many of these have been conceived of, developed or identified through interaction among evaluators, both locally and internationally, and between evaluators and their clients.

Some of the significant developments have been concerned with:

- the use of program logic and program theory (Sue Funnell, Patricia Rogers);
- the simulation of evaluation *forms* (John Owen);
- the conceptualisation and preparation of a Code of Ethics by the AES (Chris Milne, Colin Sharp);
- the development of procedures for 'whole school' evaluation by the Education Review Office in New Zealand (under the oversight of Judith Aitken);
- the articulation of processes for performance audits (Scott Bayley);
- the development of a conceptual basis for 'principles of procedure and practice' in action

research and case-study-oriented evaluations (Stephen Kemmis, Yoland Wadsworth); and

- the development in New Zealand of protocols and procedures for the evaluation of programs for Maori people which are culturally appropriate and are compatible with the terms and spirit of the Treaty of Waitangi, which is a particularly significant development.

There is, of course, much more, and I am impressed by the ingenuity and determination of those responsible for all of the initiatives which have been taken, and by those who have been prepared to 'have a go' in endeavouring to incorporate them into their evaluation practice.

Consolidate, Innovate, Expand

In choosing as the conference theme 'Consolidate, Innovate, Expand', the conference committee has challenged us to examine our evaluation theory and practice. Clearly, much has been tried and much has been learned since the advent of 'modern program evaluation' in the early 1960s, and our evaluation praxis now draws on a wide range of research traditions and practices, emanating from a great many fields. So, in *consolidating*, we are faced with the problem of what to consolidate, i.e. what to retain, what to revise or reconceptualise and what to leave behind. In making our choice, we need both good quality information on the characteristics and value of the various elements and predilections of our current evaluation practice and a 'touchstone' to

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guide our judgements. For me, this touchstone is concerned with the *appropriateness* of what we do, the *quality* of what we do and the *utility* of what we do.

There is much in our evaluation practice which requires review and the development of amended and alternative approaches and practices. The methods and models used in the evaluation of programs for indigenous peoples is one area high on my list, but there are a number of others. In undertaking our review, and each of us needs to do so, we should consider the 'Why?' of our evaluation practices as well as the 'Why not?'

In many ways, *innovation* in a field involves thinking outside the envelope, but it also involves broadening the pool of potential innovators. The Schools Commission's Innovations Program of the 1970s and 1980s deliberately broadened the pool of innovators in school-level educational practice by offering small to medium-sized grants to individual teachers, schools, parent groups and others to enable them to try something new in their own

setting, and to report back on what they did, what they learned and their assessment of its potential. This feedback was then shared in a variety of ways with their peers and others locally and across the region, the State and even nationally.

Innovations rarely just happen, of course: first there needs to be an incentive to develop something new and a commitment to do so; second, there needs to be a means of getting feedback on the innovation, not just on what is being tried, but also on its effects and on what modifications might yield worthwhile improvements; and third, there need to be criteria for judging what was done and its efficacy.

It would be naive to think that, in evaluation, **expand** simply means more evaluation. We are not selling a product where every sale is a good sale; a more appropriate criterion is that of 'value' for the

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consumer of evaluation – in other words, the application of evaluation thinking and practices where they are appropriate and will be useful.

There is a strong need to match evaluation practices to particular evaluation needs, settings and situations. Doing this well involves a judgement of what are the likely implications of implementing an evaluation practice or approach in a particular setting and to meet a specific purpose. Such judgments themselves require information which will allow us to make appropriate tradeoffs so as to maximise the information yield for the investment in evaluation. They also require a willingness to be open and flexible as we design and conduct each new evaluation study.

Moving forward in evaluation

If we are to move evaluation forward, we need to 'Consolidate', 'Innovate' and 'Expand', but in meeting these challenges we have been given by the

conference committee there are three particular needs:

- first, to obtain relevant feedback information on both our current evaluation practices and the innovations we try;
- second, to identify and apply appropriate criteria in deciding what to retain as we consolidate and which innovations to add to our evaluation toolkit; and
- third, to use appropriate information and criteria in deciding which evaluation models and practices to apply when and where.

Of course, we already have a strong basis in terms of the criteria in the US Joint Committee's Program Evaluation Standards. But the information base we have available is still quite limited.

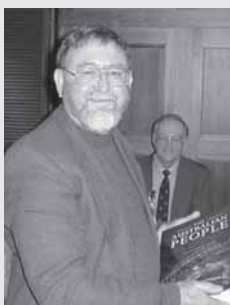
Just on 25 years ago I delivered a paper entitled 'Research of the evaluation process: Current status and future directions', which noted the rich lode of innovative conceptual and theoretical work that had been done in relation to

evaluation, but also identified the many areas where empirical information was needed to guide our decisions about how to conduct evaluation studies. It also noted the very limited number of studies which had been done to provide that information. There were many good ideas, but very few of them had been put to the test empirically in a systematic or formal way.

Ten years later, Cousins and Leithwood could only identify 65 such studies after an extensive search and even now the number of studies is tiny. In Australia there have been a small number of particularly valuable studies (including those by Susan Groundwater-Smith, Sue Funnell, John Hammond, Pam Dettman, David Goldsworthy, Len Vlahov, Sheri Hudson-Mabbs and Rick Cummings), but there are still many significant questions about the conduct of evaluation to be investigated and far too many gaps in our knowledge.

Conclusion

'Consolidate, Innovate, Expand': is it just simply a nice catchy title for the conference, or is there more to it than that? It is, in fact, quite provocative. It challenges us to not only examine our current evaluation practice, but also to search and appraise alternative practices and then choose wisely in applying them in situations and ways which are appropriate and which will optimise the utility of the evaluations we carry out. Doing our own research on evaluation, however limited, will help us to make wise choices of the evaluation approaches, models and methods to use in any particular evaluation study. However, very significant benefits on a much wider scale could arise from undertaking more systematic, larger scale studies than most of us are able to do in our regular work.



THANK YOU BARRY

Long-running Treasurer Barry Shaw stepped down in 2001. As a reward for his many years of outstanding service to the Society, outgoing President Ralph Straton made a presentation to him at the AGM.