

An adapted version of a community of practice approach to evaluation owned by indigenous stakeholders¹

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Values are at the heart of the definition of well-being and are at the heart of all evaluation initiatives. Unless the initial definitions of evaluation are owned by the stakeholders' groups (age, gender, ethnicity, culture, language etc.) and shared to develop a co-created sense of citizenship rights and responsibilities (McIntyre 2000; Romm 2001), then the process of evaluation may be compromised. This paper discusses work in progress where the author acts as a *facilitator of indigenous facilitators* who are in the process of developing an integrated model for governance that is defined and owned by an indigenous public housing association.

Introduction

The author currently acts as a *facilitator of indigenous facilitators* who are in the process of developing an integrated model for governance that is defined and owned by an indigenous public housing association. The participants in this program utilise an adapted version of a Community of Practice (COP) methodology (Wenger 1998) to undertake ongoing integrated *process evaluation*. Because this involves Participatory Action Research (PAR) (a systemic means to facilitate networking and collaboration amongst stakeholders including service providers, communities and all levels of government), the Housing Association members are the co-researchers and the actors.

Other indigenous communities could benefit from the process that was developed for this project. Learning by doing (through PAR) builds 'spiritual wellbeing' not social capital as suggested previously (King et al. 1999), and the choice of concept is ontologically important to them (McIntyre 2003, forthcoming). The participants are active research participants at all stages, from framing the research, reflecting on the findings, acting on the data and evaluating the action. PAR is iterative; it is *potentially empowering* if the participants who learn by doing own the process. This requires the development of an ethical framework to guide the research and evaluation program.

Am I the right person to undertake the process?

Empowerment means helping people to achieve greater confidence and power in the following areas: resources, relationships, information and decision-making (Gilley 1990). This approach (based on research undertaken over a period of two years in Alice Springs) is to support the capacity of indigenous housing associations (for town camps) to set up a community of practice. The work in progress aims to facilitate local indigenous facilitators to set up a COP and to use PAR as an iterative means to assess its value and impact on improving governance, guiding and designing the future development of indigenous living choices. This approach to problem solving and research and to improving governance and management is owned by the participants and supports existing initiatives and priorities. One advantage of the approach is that the process of evaluation begins when the stakeholders make decisions on what the long-term goals and objectives should be.

Social, cultural, political, economic and environmental contextual issues

Alice Springs faces some of the same challenges as other regional and non-regional areas in Australia (and elsewhere) such as the impact of privatisation on services and the reduction

in the size of government. This impacts on human services in particular. Service providers frequently rush in to address the effects of social and environmental problems without a thorough understanding of the systemic nature of the problems (as effects of historical, social, political and economic processes).

Alice Springs has almost twice the number of human services as the national average and yet the outcomes in terms of social health are dramatically below the national average (ABS 1997). The barriers to achieving health, education and employment outcomes for some indigenous citizens living in Alice Springs are both personal and social: due to systemic, social-cultural, historical, demographic, geographic, economic and political factors. The cycle is one of marginalisation, alcohol misuse and further marginalisation.

Diversity management is particularly relevant to responding to the diverse social, political and economic needs of the population, some of whom are winners and other losers in the development stakes. Planning and design needs to move away from predetermined ideas and towards co-created designs that are functional because they are relevant. Services need to reflect the values of the users and for this to occur the users need to participate in and decide on policy design and governance. The essence of the problem is that services do not really meet the perceived needs of indigenous people who are treated as consumers, rather than as participants in the development process. This has an impact on any evaluation of the provision of services; particularly as the way data are collected, and who collects the data, will influence the quality of the evaluation.

Contextual considerations for knowledge management, research and evaluation

Many complex, so called 'wicked problems', such as marginalisation or poverty cannot be solved by means of a compartmentalised approach (see Kavanagh & Richards 2000). The challenge for the future is not to work within knowledge areas, but with knowledge areas, in order to solve problems that do not fit comfortably into the disciplinary area of one specialist. Transdisciplinarity requires a knowledge management approach to *working with* areas of tacit (experiential) knowledge and explicit (codified) knowledge, and finding ways to transfer areas of embedded knowledge (see Gibbons et al. 1994) across stakeholders. In turn, this has implications for the contemporaneous and subsequent evaluation of the resultant programs.

Diversity management is based on asking What?, Why? and How? questions in iterative cycles as a means to surface technical, strategic and communicative issues. It is ideally suited to addressing complex, systemically linked social, cultural, political and economic issues such as those that in Alice Springs pertain to the governance of town camps and empowering the participants. It is also suited to enhancing participation. Participatory action learning (using systemic approaches) is one of learning through dialogue, observation and action with age and gender groups (Stanley & Wise 1993),

with the specific goal of improving social dynamics and empowering the participants to address their sense of wellbeing.

The impact of this at a praxis level (this means linking thinking and doing) is both practical and idealistic. This is not a contradiction. Unless indigenous facilitators can empower people to voice their vision through respectful dialogue, creativity will be lost and democracy will be stunted (Banathy 1996, 2001; McIntyre 2000). Building trust is a focus throughout. Without trust the *process evaluation* and *organisational learning* can be seen (at best) as rhetoric or (at worst) as just another means to control the participants.

To ensure the required 'respectful dialogue' the research protocols are based on asking the following questions (drawing on Ulrich 1983 and McIntyre 1994):

QUESTIONS ON WHICH RESEARCH PROTOCOLS ARE BASED

- Am I the right person to undertake the process?
- Why is the evaluation being undertaken?
- Who asked for it? In whose interests is the research? Was the research undertaken on the basis of a request by indigenous stakeholders?
- If so which stakeholders?
- How do they define themselves in relation to other stakeholders? Who defined the issue?
- Do you understand the context of the research? Are you sure that you are not going to do more harm than good? Who has participated in the process of decision-making?
- In whose interests are the decisions?
- Do the participants represent a wide range of people across sectors and disciplines?
- Have all the participants in the project had a say in setting the goals and objectives?
- Have a wide range of interest groups been represented?
- Have the social, cultural, political, economic and environmental aspects of the decision been considered in terms of a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) chart?
- Who will participate in the process of implementation and why?
- Are the goals and objectives in line with sustainable development?
- Has there been an adequate opportunity to review these objectives in the light of the social, political, cultural, economic and environmental factors?
- What is the organisational design of the project?
- What are the formal and informal communication channels?
- Where are the breakdowns in communication and why?
- What is the structural context of the organisation(s) doing the implementation?

- What are the barriers to implementation and how are these being addressed?
- What are the expected and unexpected outcomes of the project?
- Who or what will be positively impacted?
- Who or what will be negatively impacted?
- What steps have been taken to maximise long-term benefits to the environment and social justice in order to ensure a sustainable future?
- What are the outcomes?
- Has the environment benefited?

Adherence to this ethical protocol adds to the likelihood that meaningful responses to these research questions can and will be obtained:

- What are the most effective action-learning methods and processes for building indigenous management capacity?
- Given that the stakeholders need to be asked questions to address areas of knowledge pertaining to technical knowledge and skills, strategic knowledge and skills and communicative knowledge and skills, what are the most appropriate and transferable management models and processes?
- How transferable is the policy information derived from this research to other public housing settings for indigenous communities? What contributes to better management of public housing at the local, state and Commonwealth level?

Conclusions

This approach ensures that history, language, religion, politics and the environment are most often 'swept into' discussions, rather than framed out by more rigid approaches to research, management and evaluation (see Ulrich 2001). A systemic, ethical and practical approach is vital to ensure that multiple variables are held in mind. Ignoring 'just one variable' can make all the difference: a mistranslation of a term, ignoring cultural nuances, token gender considerations, forgetting the importance of social dynamics and their political/historical context can undermine the viability of an evaluation exercise. Such an approach also allows for the process to consider both the intended and the unintended results of interventions.

Undertaking indigenous research and the notion of evaluation is problematic. Who decides what needs to be researched and why? In whose interests is the research and who should undertake or facilitate the process? Evaluation is about meanings and making a judgement. The area is fraught with difficulties from the outset. If ownership and self-determination is to occur then perhaps an approach to research and evaluation that is participatory and owned by the participants is to be preferred if the study is not to do more harm than good.

Note

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