

Making sense of experience reflective practice

Society's response to alcohol and drug problems must continually evolve. The author expresses optimism about evaluation's ability to guide change from the ground up through developing a culture of ongoing learning. It is argued that the alcohol and other drug treatment sector has a particular need for empowering professional development processes. The article describes the background to and personal experience of a new unit within a Graduate Diploma in Alcohol and Other Drug Studies course.

This article is an edited version of a paper presented on 7 September 2007 at the conference of the Australasian Evaluation Society, 'Doing Evaluation Better', Melbourne. Bridget Roberts introduced the presentation by acknowledging the people of the Kulin nation, specifically the Wurundjeri (the first people to occupy the Melbourne area and the custodians of this land), including their elders past and present.

Introduction

After several years of conducting evaluations in the alcohol and drug treatment sector I'm developing a course and have started teaching frontline workers and managers about evaluation. It's a single-semester, graduate-level subject called 'Making Sense of Experience' and it draws on the fields of both reflective practice—specifically reflective practice writing—and evaluation. This article reflects on some of my thinking after working with the first group of students last semester. I'll start with some background thoughts, then describe the course and offer my reflections.

First of all, two scenes:

The first one is from a recent trip back to England:

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I'm walking in the English Lake District and thinking about my other home, Australia. The biggest issue I see from there is the position and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, the attitudes of the rest of Australia towards them, and what that means for all of us. I think about John Howard and Mal Brough (our former Prime Minister and his Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs) ordering in the army to the Northern Territory and suspending the permit system, banning alcohol, mandating health checks on all Indigenous children. This is after apparently ignoring years of research and evaluation reports with umpteen carefully considered recommendations about how to prevent alcohol-related abuse and violence in Indigenous communities, and the need for better investment in housing, telephones, emergency and health services, schools and real support for self-determination. I know that something had to be done ... but without consultation? Without so much as a nod to collective wisdom about sensitive and effective ways forward? If any of the initiatives work, it will be because the wise have managed to salvage some influence and direct some money towards the things that have been long recommended but starved of resources and long-term commitment.

I look at my life in Australia, and my career, and I really wonder about evaluation. At times such as this, politicians make me despair of it as a worthwhile endeavour

The second scene is from my writing during the first session of the Making Sense of Experience course:

Here I am in a group of strangers and we're all writing together—six minutes, non-stop, anything goes. Already that feels like an offer of trust, an acceptance of trust, which I find moving. Who knows what people are writing? It could be nothing or anything in the world. But already there's movement—the seeds of something new perhaps. I've said that we'll learn together. I'm trusting the process and hoping. I hear pens and hands moving, a sigh. Reminds me a bit of school, but then it was mostly, 'What do you know?' not 'How are you feeling?' 'What's happening?' 'What do you think it means?'

This article reflects on where I'm up to in my relationship with evaluation—at times almost despairing, at others relentlessly, fiercely optimistic about evaluation capacity building, when I think that the only way things will improve is if evaluation is done every day (thank you Yoland Wadsworth for *Everyday Evaluation on the Run* (1997) and the learnings are absorbed from the ground up)—a groundswell of knowledge and wisdom that policymakers cannot ignore.

My hope is that by helping professionals and other workers at the front line to reflect, evaluate and apply their learning, we can work better together and the politicians will soak up the wisdom.

Some personal background

In my first experience of any kind of evaluation, back in the seventies, it was called reviewing and it was a key element of one- to three-week residential leadership courses for corporate managers. The courses were based on experiential learning through the mediums of outdoor adventure activities and drama and art projects. This was at Brathay Hall¹ (back in the Lake District on the shores of Windermere) and the courses were influenced by the work of Dewey (1938), Hahn (1936) (who was a major influence on Outward Bound²), Kolb (1984) (of the 'do-review-apply' learning cycle) and the then contemporary work of Adair (1983) on Action Centred Leadership. I'm sure that nowadays they will be up with the latest on 'learning organisations'.

In the courses, sequences of group activities were followed by facilitated group reviews to aid reflection on experience and gradually improve, during the course, participants' ability to reflect in action (although then we didn't have Schön's (1983) articulation of *reflection on action* and *reflection in action*.) For many people these courses were highly memorable and fulfilling ... but we were always taxed by the question of whether, in spite of our best efforts, the learning really transferred to the work situation.

Four deep learnings stand out, for me, from running those groups all those years ago. They were reinforced when I later used a similar approach with people with mental illness and somehow they are resurfacing more and more with each evaluation I conduct now. Above all is the value of experiential learning. Second, there is the importance of reflection and evaluation to aid learning. Third, the power of people in groups, given the right environment, to identify and articulate their learning, to understand how they learn, to draw meaning from experience and to learn from challenges. Finally, I started to learn how to provide respectful and skilled facilitation of adult learning.

I was a few years into my evaluation career (and I acknowledge John Owen and the Centre for Program Evaluation for my training and Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre for my apprenticeship) before I really connected my Brathay Hall experience with my role as an evaluator. Perhaps I was preoccupied with all the formal frameworks and conventions of the discipline and getting it all 'right'. Perhaps also it was because I was in an organisation mainly dedicated at that time to clinical trials and other 'black box' research. But over the years I realised more and more that we in the evaluation unit at Turning Point might be missing the potential of frontline workers and managers to participate fully in evaluations. Many were articulate about the evaluation questions, aware of context, aware of others' views as well

as their own. Others were variously reticent, self-justifying, narrowly focused on their job and particular beliefs, sometimes defensive, sometimes quick to speak of a lack of resources rather than critically reflect on practice and systemic issues. They often saw the evaluation purpose as accountability alone, and a chance to argue for much-needed extra resources, rather than learning and improvement. On a couple of evaluations, however, I was able to work with groups of alcohol and drug clinicians, meeting regularly throughout the evaluation to share experiences and data, develop theories, steer the evaluation and discuss findings. There was much 'process use' of these collaborative evaluations but capacity building was limited: Preskill's five imperatives³ were not all there—there was a learning perspective (and understanding of the programs certainly deepened) but we were not intentional about capacity building, we did not expect and plan for change and we did not have scope for multiple learning strategies or anything to support sustainability.

I saw a need for professional development in everyday reflection and evaluation. For one thing, it would make my job easier in conducting external evaluations. For another, the alcohol and other drugs (AOD) workforce has a distinct need to make sense of its experience. As few are familiar with the field, I'll summarise why before discussing the course.

Challenges in alcohol and other drug treatment

Dependence on alcohol and other drugs is a chronic and relapsing condition. Many people recover spontaneously, others respond to treatment, others die with or from a complex of physical and mental health problems and/or injuries. Partners and children are affected. People with alcohol and/or other drug problems are often homeless and/or in trouble with the law. There is effective treatment that works for some people some of the time. There's no magic bullet and one size does not fit all. Sometimes all a clinician can do is aim to help a person stay alive long enough to reach their turning point. It's a multidisciplinary field, across health and welfare. There are competing views on moral and medical issues around risky drug use and dependence, and rivalries between different philosophies of treatment and recovery (although they all in fact fit under the national public health policy of harm minimisation). Funding tends to be for projects and outputs rather than infrastructure. There are few resources for supervision and professional development. In relation to the health sector, it's a poor relation of another poor relation, mental health ... never mind that mental health and AOD problems account for a large proportion of the burden of disease. Because of all this and more, stress, burnout and staff turnover are high and services find it difficult to attract and retain staff.

A unit on reflective practice and evaluation

The subject I developed, within Turning Point's Graduate Diploma in Alcohol and Other Drug Studies, aimed to introduce and link key aspects of reflective practice and evaluation. Participants included three AOD clinicians, a manager of a withdrawal unit, a teacher looking for a career change, a researcher, a PhD candidate in organisational development, and my own human resources manager. The course content, covered in 11 evening sessions, touched on:

- reflective practice, defined as 'practice based on understanding and interpretation of principles, justifications and meanings, on an examination of values, attitudes and beliefs' (Morrison, cited in Bolton 2005)
- reflective practice writing, guided by a book of that name by Bolton (2005). She quotes Lyotard (1992): 'We write before knowing what to say and how to say it, and in order to find out, if possible'. We would start each session with a writing exercise and discussion of what emerged
- evaluation forms and approaches, with Owen's *Program Evaluation: Forms and Approaches* (2006) as the main text
- evaluative inquiry for learning in organisations (Preskill & Torres 1999), with Senge's (1990) definition of a learning organisation as 'people at all levels collectively and continually enhance their capacity to create the environment and outcomes they want'.

We discussed, among much else, how an evaluation can usefully build on aspects of reflective practice, and how the design can build in opportunities for deep reflection and reflexivity (not forgetting the risks around this and the need for clear boundaries and support).

Has this course worked? I really don't know yet. The students said they were inspired, they displayed new confidence in expressing their own thoughts and feelings about their work, and there was a detectable sparkle in their eyes at times.

Reflections from my course notebook

- 'I realise I NEED to reflect.'
- 'I have been just doing task supervision. Now I have a separate reflective process—I ask open questions about how people are, how they are feeling, what they are enjoying, and so on. Then I have to get better at responding to what comes up as private spaces are opened to public view, so I'm working on that with my supervisor.'
- 'I'm keeping notes, a journal of what's happening, how I feel, how I can make sense of it and how I can apply it.'

- ‘Writing helps me reframe things. It’s neater than talking—not just wandering thoughts. It’s surprisingly intense, and exciting to read over afterwards.’
- ‘Hearing others is inspiring. It triggers my own reflection.’
- ‘Getting the group’s response [to my writing] gives me new insights.’

During the course the group talked about what a learning organisation might look like, and the kinds of helpful things an external evaluator might find there when embarking on an evaluation. Some examples from a long list:

- reflective notes of meetings
- insights from journals
- insights from regular mentoring and professional supervision, linking experience and theory
- communities of practice and networks for support and idea development (see Wenger 1999)
- policies and practice in place to accreditation standard and kept alive through review—not usually thought of as deeply reflective but do reinforce the idea of learning and growing
- senior managers who encourage and model the above and foster a culture of learning.

Time will tell whether the course worked as a learning experience and whether it can add somewhat to the toolkits of frontline workers and managers. I’d like the subject to run another few times and follow up the students afterwards.

It has confirmed and strengthened my aspirations to be part of the continuing growth of evaluation theory and practice that empowers and educates, enlivens practice and is part of a social change movement. I look forward to networking with others to take this further.

Notes

- 1 Brathay Hall (Ambleside, Cumbria, UK) provides experiential, adventure-based residential programs for young people and for people in organisations, with a focus on the development of teams, leaders and managers.
- 2 Outward Bound is an international, not-for-profit outdoor education organisation. Programs aim to foster the personal growth and social skills of participants by using challenging expeditions in the outdoors.
- 3 In her keynote address at the AES International Conference in Melbourne in September 2007, Dr Hallie Preskill, Professor in the School of Behavioral and Organizational Sciences at Claremont Graduate University, California outlined five imperatives for evaluation: be intentional, take a learning perspective, expect and plan for change, use multiple learning strategies, and be sustainable.

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