Capacity Building Evaluation of Capacity Building Programs

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Abstract

Capacity building features strongly in the plans of Primary Care Partnerships (PCPs) in Victoria. In designing the evaluation of six capacity-building projects implemented by one rural PCP, the evaluators opted to use an approach that would, in turn, enhance the capacity of program staff to undertake evaluations of their own programs.

An over-arching framework was developed for the evaluation, based on a program logic model. The same framework was used to develop an individual program logic for each of the six projects. Participants were coached through the development of an evaluation plan and supported to undertake their evaluations. The aggregated findings will contribute to the body of knowledge of PCP member organisations.

Lessons learned include the need to take a pragmatic approach to enable participants to include evaluation tasks in their busy work schedules.

Key words
Evaluation, capacity-building, program logic, learning organisation

Introduction
This is a work in progress. We present it here for interest and discussion.

When Evolving Ways was invited to evaluate six capacity building projects, we proposed an approach that would strengthen the capacity of individuals, agencies and groups of agencies to design and conduct evaluations of their programs and utilise the evaluations to further enhance planning and practice. In line with the marked attention given to capacity building these days, we would take a capacity building approach to the evaluation of capacity building programs.

The six projects are being conducted by East Gippsland Primary Care Partnership in eastern Victoria.

Primary Care Partnerships (PCPs), an initiative of the Victorian Department of Human Services (DHS), are voluntary alliances of primary care providers, usually covering two or three local government areas. East Gippsland PCP comprises one local government area but this covers over 20,000 square kilometres and includes some of the most remote areas of Victoria. There are 23 member organisations, ranging from a large regional health service to small bush nursing centres. Service types include acute care, primary care, aged care and disability services and a Division of General Practice.

PCPs aim to improve the health and well-being of people in their communities through coordination of planning and service delivery (DHS, September 2000).

East Gippsland PCP developed six projects in response to locally identified needs. Two of these focus on service integration and four have service coordination models. All projects have the aim of building capacity of individuals, groups and organisations to work in ways that help bring about improved health outcomes for their communities.

Each project includes a group of agencies that are members of the PCP. Each project has an emphasis on building capacity at individual, organisation and partnership levels. Each is coordinated by a lead agency. There is an overall steering committee made up of the PCP Executive Officer and senior managers of participating agencies. Individual advisory groups provide guidance to specific projects.

The evaluation
Each project had a small budget for evaluation. Project managers elected to pool resources to enable a coordinated approach to evaluating all projects. This allows for more comprehensive information about what works and why. Strengthening the evaluation capacity of individuals and organisations will mean that future evaluations will also contribute to the pool of knowledge about what works well, what are the barriers and opportunities.

An added component is an overarching evaluation of the capacity of agencies to work together towards achieving common goals.

Capacity building
Capacity building has gained much currency in recent years. Governments promote its principles in various fields including health promotion, agricultural, economic and environmental programs. It is seen as a foundation for sustainable communities.

Capacity includes the independence and self-reliance of individuals, their groups, organisations and communities. It is the ability to plan and respond to challenges. It involves a range of assets such as knowledge and skills, problem-solving and decision-making capabilities, resources, networks and contacts.

Capacity building involves processes that strengthen the capacities of individuals, groups and communities. These processes might include leadership, creating links and networks, encouraging initiatives, facilitating, training and finding resources.

In developing its capacity building approach, the PCP looked at the work undertaken for NSW Health by Hawe et al (2000). In this work, capacity building is defined as being three activities that build:
  • infrastructure to deliver programs;
  • partnerships and organisational environments, so that strategies can be sustained; and
  • problem solving capability.
The East Gippsland projects are occurring within the context of a political commitment to capacity building that has spawned a number of other projects with a capacity building agenda being implemented in the region.

Methodology
Using a capacity building approach, we took the roles of coaches and facilitators and used a number of strategies to support the evaluations:
  Establishment of an 'evaluation team' to provide a central focus for the evaluation and reflect on processes and outcomes;
  Provision of basic training with an overview of evaluation and its utilisation;
  Development of a logic model, or theory of change, which could be used for each of the projects. A common framework allowed for development of project-specific content for individual projects;
  Development of indicators and measures for short-term outcomes;
  Face-to-face support at key points;
  Ongoing availability of the Evolving Ways team through email and telephone; and
  Workshops for reflection on the projects, learning opportunities and potential future strategies

It was intended to have an evaluation team for each project, to include manager, project worker, representatives from other agencies and consumer or community representatives. This would have

maximised opportunities for sharing, learning and dissemination of knowledge and would have provided a wide base for reflection.

This was the first modification to the methodology. It was decided that the logistics of organising six teams were too difficult, particularly in view of distances and competing demands on people's time,. As well, some people were involved in more than one project and so would have increased time and effort. It was decided, therefore to have one evaluation team with representatives from all of the projects. These representatives acted as links between the evaluation team and the individual project advisory groups.

The evaluation team was given a basic overview of evaluation. Whilst some people had experience with and understanding of evaluation processes, it was important for all participants to have at least basic knowledge. As presentations were combined with workshop activities, the mixed skill level provided opportunities for shared learning and fostered a team approach.

It was decided to use a logic model to provide a common framework for developing the individual projects. Following presentation of the concept of logic models and their application, a suggested framework was put forward, based on models that appear frequently in evaluation literature.

Following refinement of the model, a workshop was held to develop indicators and measures for individual projects. It was important that indicators made sense to participants in the projects and that measures could be supported with data that could be collected locally without being too onerous.

The development of logic models and moving from these to identification of indicators and measures took a number of sessions. Between meetings, we reflected on and suggested modifications to the plans for data collection. Modifications to the measures, and even the indicators, were made over time as people thought more about what measures would be most meaningful and what data could be obtained expeditiously.

Each project developed a plan to show what data would be collected, how, and by whom. Some groups modified quite ambitious regimes as the time for data collection drew closer. All have been encouraged to ensure *qualitative* data is sought as well as *quantitative*. The merits of written surveys versus face-to-face or telephone interviews or focus groups have been discussed.

When data from individual programs has been collected and analysed there will be a workshop to share learnings. This will also be an opportunity for reflection on the overall processes and outcomes, learning opportunities and future possibilities.

Learning organisations
The collaborative approach to evaluation among the six projects, with all contributing to the encompassing element to explore the ways agencies are working together, provides a golden opportunity for learning together.

The notion of a 'learning organisation' has developed over decades. Argyris and Schön (1978) highlighted how individual learning can be harnessed to promote collective learning. Groups and organisations can learn, not just individuals. "Organizational learning involves changes in the people of an organization as well as changes in organizational structure, operating procedures and culture" (Johnson, 1998: 103).

Senge raised the profile of the 'learning organisation', particularly with the publication of his popular work "The Fifth Discipline" (Senge, 1992). He defined the learning organisation as one "…where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together" (1992: 1). Further, Senge described a learning organisation as one "…that is continually expanding its capacity to create its future" (14).

Structures for supporting agencies to work together are conducive to shared learning and dissemination of knowledge. Networking organisations encourage knowledge sharing and assist in building new knowledge (Pemberton and Stonehouse, 2000). In East Gippsland, the PCP has provided the structure and opportunities for participating agencies to learn together.

Evaluation in a Learning Organisation

Proactive use of evaluation is consistent with a commitment to learning and ongoing development and change. Project-based evaluation helps organisations to learn about effective practices and supports the development of new service models and programs. Efficient learning processes enable the use of information and knowledge produced through evaluation. As well, the implementation and use of evaluation contributes to the organisations' evaluation competencies (Moxley and Manela, 2000). We expect then, that as capacity for evaluation expands, more complex learning occurs that, in turn, contributes to greater capacity to respond to needs and challenges.

Issues and Lessons

The first issue relates to expectations. Whilst there seemed to be a common understanding between the commissioning agents and ourselves, when other participants were first involved it became clear there was a range of expectations and ability to commit to the proposed methodology. This meant exploring and renegotiating the methodology and a redefining of the potential for breadth of capacity building.

The next issue relates to limited energies and resources. Workers, particularly those in rural services, often take on multiple roles and competing demands mean limited time available for a specific project and its evaluation. This would have been an issue for any participatory evaluation but the approach to build skills and knowledge in the team meant more investment of their time and energy than might otherwise have been the case.

Logic models are useful in delineating clear links between program inputs, activities, processes and outcomes. The process of developing the logic model provided the opportunity for the evaluation team to develop a shared understanding of the collective goals of the projects. The downside, however, is the amount of time taken to work through the process of developing logic models that all are happy with. There were a number of iterations for each of the projects and several sessions to talk through the framework, indicators and measures.

Similar experiences are reported in the literature. Brown (1998) discusses the time-consuming nature of developing a framework and the multiple tasks for the evaluators, including:
   engaging all key stakeholders;
   establishing a trust relationship with participants to be able to question and challenge without threatening the relationship;
   repeated interaction for understanding, reflection, and modification or elaboration of the model.

Cornell and Kubisch (1998) also comment on the investment of time and 'political capital' in developing "plausible, doable and testable" theories of change. The balance is that participants and evaluators gain a good understanding of the flow of the program, interaction of different components and effective means of measuring outcomes.

As most of the East Gippsland PCP projects were developed from the bottom up, there was much discussion and reflection in the developmental stages. Most of this had occurred before the evaluators joined the process. Much of the exploration of ideas and strategies that would lead to the development of a logic model had already occurred before the notion of such a model was introduced.

There would be merit in the evaluators being brought in at the program development stage. This would integrate the processes and enhance learning opportunities. However, from a resource perspective, this either adds to the cost of the evaluation or means modifications further into the process.

One of the values of evaluation is the opportunity to reflect on all aspects of a project, including practices, processes and supporting structures. Exploration of the strengths and weaknesses supports a culture of continuous improvement. There is some danger in a structured logic model encouraging a process of looking for the data which will tell us whether the desired outcomes have been achieved, but not reflecting on how or why things happened as they did.

Often funding bodies require evaluation for purposes of accountability but do not necessarily encourage a more reflective approach that leads to learning and improvement. Whilst there is an obvious need to satisfy funding bodies that their funds are well used, evaluations should be beneficial to the participants and findings should be available to allow others to replicate and build upon program designs.

With the time-consuming nature of developing logic models, there has been less of an action research approach to the evaluation of the six projects. An action research approach produces cycles of implementation, reflection, adaptation and creating new visions and practices (Stringer, 1996; Patton, 1990; Owen and Rogers 1999). Participatory evaluation, particularly an action research approach which is 'owned' by participants, can be an effective learning tool. Action evaluation allows for the integration of knowledge production into the design, implementation and assessment of programs (Friedman and Rothman, undated)

Preskill and Torres (1999) promote a process of evaluative inquiry, whereby participants reflect on a program's systems, processes and services within the context of learning about the program and about the evaluative process.

The concept of evaluation as a learning process is also developed by Rossman and Rallos (2000) who describe a critical inquiry cycle as the foundation of knowledge generation. They see the evaluator as a partner in knowledge construction. The evaluator can provide a framework for the evaluation and facilitate the evaluative processes undertaken by stakeholder participants. Evaluation is used to develop knowledge to advance practices in the agency. As well, the evaluation process should contribute to evaluation competence.

There is evidence that some participants have an appreciation of the value of evaluation in changing practice. For example, the potential for using the logic model as a tool in project design.

Conclusions

How is the evaluation capacity project making a difference?
Whilst the breadth of capacity building we originally envisaged has narrowed, participating individuals are developing skills and knowledge in relation to evaluating current and future projects. Opportunities for disseminating this knowledge occur through the project advisory groups, consisting of a range of stakeholders.

Increased knowledge and skills leads to increased confidence. This, in turn, increases the likelihood of applying the knowledge and skills to future projects and their evaluation.

There is great potential for the learnings from all of the evaluations to be fed back into the existing pool of knowledge to increase the capacity for program development.

We see the knowledge base as similar to a sponge, expanding as it absorbs learnings and experience through the implementation and evaluation of individual projects. This accumulated knowledge is then available for continuous improvement of current projects and for program development.

The challenge now is to sustain the process of knowledge development in agencies and alliances by moving beyond the evaluation team.

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