**Blurring the boundaries: The evaluator as external observer and partner in change**

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The views in this paper are those of the author rather than her organisation.

***Abstract***

*How can independent evaluators add maximum value to a program evaluation while retaining their position as external observers? What are the strengths and limitations of a formative approach, from the perspectives of different stakeholder groups?*

*This paper explores the implementation of action research methodologies as part of a formative evaluation with very direct influence on the design and delivery of four projects around NSW. It reflects on the value of formative, as against summative, evaluation, and the power of the former as a tool of communication and stakeholder engagement, as well as of analysis.*

*The presentation draws on experiences from the formative evaluation of The Better Practice Project for Home and Community Care (HACC) in NSW, commissioned by the NSW Department of Family and Community Services in 2010. It involves an independent team from Elton Consulting and Age Communications working closely with four demonstration projects around NSW to evaluate the implementation of a new ‘enabling’ approach to the delivery of home-based care services for older people.*

*The paper describes several areas where the formative methodology had particular impacts on this evaluation project – and identifies key features of the formative process which need to be considered by all stakeholders when embarking on this type of evaluation.*

***Introduction***

This paper is about some of the issues and challenges that our team has encountered during a formative evaluation project we’ve been undertaking since June of last year.

The project isn’t yet complete, but there have been several interesting lessons for us – some of which we feel throw light on the particular challenges (and opportunities) inherent in a formative evaluation process.

There are three areas where we’ve particularly noticed the impacts of the formative design of the evaluation:

* Communication of findings – recognising the needs of different stakeholders
* The relationship between evaluation and supervision/management
* Evaluation in a changing environment.

What we’ve learned in these areas has come together for us into a few ‘warnings for other evaluators’ who choose to use formative approaches – and some observations about managing the process successfully for everyone involved.

***About the evaluation project***

This evaluation is being conducted by a team from Elton Consulting and Age Communications, for the NSW Department of Family and Community Services – Ageing Disability and Home Care. This paper focuses on the part of the project which involved evaluation of the effectiveness of four ‘demonstration projects’ operating around NSW, during their first year of operation.

These projects are trialling a new approach to the delivery of home-based care services for older people. The new approach is based on the idea that older people, with appropriate support, can continue to care for themselves independently in the community. It is referred to as an ‘enabling’ approach.

Each of the four demonstration projects was funded by the NSW government to develop and implement a new model of care based on enabling principles. All of the models involved a short-term intervention designed to help clients to pursue their individual goals for independent living. The demonstration projects work to support their clients to develop their own skills, abilities, and confidence, and to modify their environments and behaviours to better support them as they age.

More information about the demonstration projects can be found on the agency’s website (<http://www.adhc.nsw.gov.au/sp/delivering_hacc_services/the_better_practice_project>).

For this paper, the most relevant points about the projects are:

* The demonstration projects have very different models. Some use existing staff, some have recruited especially for the project; some run the demonstration project separately alongside existing services, some have integrated it into their general service delivery; some limit the types of care which can be provided through the project, some do not. Furthermore, the location of each project, and the size and structure of its host organisation, influences the ways in which referrals, assessments, administration and reporting are handled.
* Projects were at different points in their preparation when the evaluation commenced –some were providing services to their first clients, others had not yet finalised intake and assessment processes.

***Design of the evaluation***

An initial evaluation framework and methodology had been developed before the Elton Consulting / Age Communications team came on board. This framework addressed both outcomes and processes, and involved data collection as follows:

* Data on client outcomes in three areas: functional ability, personal wellbeing, and goal achievement
* Service use information for clients during and after exit from the demonstration projects
* Comparator information from clients who did not participate in the enabling demonstration projects
* Feedback about their experiences from clients and/or carers who participated in the demonstration projects
* Information about the costs of the projects and the ways resources were used
* Feedback from other service providers who referred people to the projects.

Supporting the ‘enabling’ approach of the demonstration projects themselves, the evaluation team modified the existing evaluation framework to include a formative dimension. This involved:

* The addition of three-monthly cycles of data analysis and reporting. Data on client outcomes and program activities was analysed and reported back to the demonstration projects each quarter in a written report. Discussion of this data, in focus groups with key staff of each project, formed the basis of the action learning process with each individual demonstration project.
* The creation of a Learning Network among the projects, to allow them to come together and share their lessons and challenges at regular intervals during the pilot period. This was supported by ‘learning journals’ in which each project recorded the challenges and opportunities they encountered, and their responses to them, during the journey of implementing the new approach to care delivery. Learning Network meetings provided a forum for collective learning by all four projects – and by the funding government agency.

We added the formative dimension to maximise the influence of the evaluation, by supporting the demonstration projects to continually reflect on their own practices and to respond to the evaluation’s findings at quarterly intervals.

***Role of the evaluators***

The evaluation was commissioned by a government agency, which was also the funding body for the demonstration projects.

The role of the evaluators was to provide independent assessment of the effectiveness of the four projects, but also to support the projects to understand and respond to the issues which emerged during the evaluation.

In order to collect comparable data across four diverse service models, the evaluation team worked very closely with each individual project and develop a strong understanding of their processes and systems. This was partly to ensure that data categories were being applied consistently between projects, but also to allow us to contextualise the quantitative data we collected – for example, better access to public physiotherapy in one region resulted in significantly less reported expenditure on this service, compared to others which were achieving similar health and fitness outcomes.

The close working relationships developed with the individual projects also formed the basis for open two-way discussion of the barriers and challenges they encountered. The wider perspective of the evaluation team meant that we were sometimes able to offer practical support to projects, in the form of information about how other projects had responded to similar issues. The Learning Network meetings allowed this exchange to take place unmediated, but our role as ‘partners in change’ was still considerable.

From the perspective of the government agency, our primary role was to report as external observers on what was happening in the projects – with a particular focus on innovative approaches and lessons learned.

***Initial challenges for the evaluation***

Initially, we faced two data collection challenges which were not related to the formative design of the evaluation methodology:

* Lack of meaningful outcome data - two of the projects could not supply any quantitative data at all during the first quarter, and a third had very little.
* Challenges associated with the need to capture data about a wide variety of different types of service delivery in a meaningful way – especially in the context of varied ways of reporting activity, e.g. dollars versus hours.

A third challenge was that of investigator bias – in this case, the need to prevent the classification categories selected to make the data meaningful for evaluation and reporting from influencing the actual activities undertaken by the projects, e.g. narrowing projects’ thinking about what interventions are possible. This is another challenge that is not particular to formative evaluation, but is emphasised in an environment of repeated reporting against pre-determined categories of analysis.

These challenges, once recognised, could be addressed using adjustments to our methodology and reporting. However, as the project has progressed some more interesting questions began to emerge about the limits of our dual role as independent observers and ‘partners in change’.

***Formative evaluation – three areas of interest***

In our work on this project to date, we have identified many areas where the formative or ‘action research’ nature of our study has had impacts or influence which would not have been the case had we simply completed a summative evaluation.

We have seen very high levels of stakeholder engagement, reflective practice, and continuous improvement which have strengthened the demonstration projects in many ways. We have also seen significant workforce development, improved community awareness, and better understanding among referral partners of the new model of care.

However there have been some areas in which the impacts of the quarterly cycle of reporting and the sharing of experiences through the Learning Network have been more problematic:

1. Communication of findings – recognising the needs of different stakeholders

The formative evaluation cycle necessitates repeated data analysis and reporting. This process is intended to give stakeholders evidence and insights on which they can act to improve the project under evaluation. In this case, the cycles were also intended to give the funding body information about progress and material with which to promote the program – initial findings, lessons learned, and client stories.

The needs of these two types of stakeholder were very different. In practice, what this resulted in was a splitting of the quarterly report into two documents:

* A data report which emphasised key trends and patterns in the quantitative data and discussed these in the context of the different service models, implementation approaches, and demographic characteristics of the four projects
* An overview report which focused on the ‘bigger picture’ observations and lessons.

This solution allowed us to provide analysis targeted for both sets of needs – but it also began to reveal a duality in our role. Different types of data were more relevant for each of the two reports, and different styles of analysis and reporting were required.

1. The relationship between evaluation and supervision/management

As the evaluation progressed, it became increasingly clear that our external perspective and close working relationships with the four projects meant that the evaluation team were in the position of having considerable in-depth understanding of how the four projects were operating – more understanding than any one of the other stakeholders (including the funding body).

Data which we had collected and analysed for evaluation purposes was also useful for monitoring the financial and service delivery performance of the projects. When questions or concerns arose about the management or administration of any of the projects, our understanding was sought to help clarify the situation.

This gave rise to perception among some of the projects that our quarterly evaluation cycle equated to a form of monitoring by the funding agency. Projects began to feel that they needed to ‘improve’ their results, particularly with respect to client numbers, client outcomes, and the reported costs of delivering interventions. Areas of most interest to the funding body began to receive greatest attention from projects and greatest emphasis in the cyclical reporting.

This issue was largely resolved by the appointment of a new ‘demonstration projects coordinator’ role, with responsibility for oversight of all four projects. The shifting of monitoring and overall project management responsibilities onto this role made it easier for us as the evaluation team to focus on capturing and analysing the story of what was going on in the projects, without perceptions that we were also ‘policing’ processes or outcomes.

1. Evaluation in a changing environment

Formative evaluation seeks to foster change as part of the evaluation process. Each cycle of analysis presents the projects with opportunities to reflect on their progress and adjust their practices. So change is an inherent part of the operating environment, one you decide to use a formative approach.

For this project, there were several areas where changes were particularly visible during the first year:

* Changes to the types of people who were becoming clients of the projects – due to attempts to recruit more participants in response to slow uptakes, improving levels of staff understanding of who was suitable, and better referrals from external partners as they learned more about the projects
* Increases in staff skills and confidence as the projects progressed, leading to greater enthusiasm and engagement, as well as better promotional activities
* Changes in the actual interventions with clients which projects were undertaking – partly as a result of hearing what others were doing, through the Learning Networks
* Changes resulting from issues of concern to the funding body – e.g. lengths of programs, costs of interventions, ages of clients.

These changes – along with some other factors - meant that for several of the projects the actual service model evolved over time...which of course has significant impacts on the comparability of data collected over time.

For the evaluation, this meant that the importance of qualitative analysis increased as each quarter passed. The data on client outcomes and levels of service delivery can only be understood alongside understanding of the changes which have occurred within the projects. This may weaken the ‘neatness’ of the final evaluation report, but it may also strengthen its potential to contribute to real understanding of the barriers and enablers to implementation of the new approach to care delivery.

***Observations***

It is clear to us as a team that the formative nature of this evaluation has had strong influence on the projects being evaluated. Two of the original demonstration projects have closed – one in order to apply its model to a different target group, and one in order to develop an entirely new model of service delivery. The formative process almost certainly accelerated both the understanding of the limitations of those original models and the extraction of lessons for future implementation.

Of the two projects that continue, only one remains in the form in which it was originally envisaged. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this is the project which had the slowest start, and so had the greatest opportunity to learn from the other projects before launching its model.

The dual role of the evaluation team in this project is becoming increasingly clear to us. As active partners with the demonstration projects, we have participated in the development of new approaches and strategies which have changed the shape of their models, the people who they target, and the interventions they deliver. As external observers, this level of change impacts on our capacity to provide meaningful analysis. The shift which takes place has to be towards a more process-oriented evaluation – one in which the evaluation itself is recognised as a significant factor in the process of change.

A significant challenge here is making sure that all parties to the evaluation are comfortable with the impacts of a formative process.

In our experience, there has been a tension between the expectations of different stakeholders. A formative process is dynamic. It will involve testing things, taking risks, and accepting a relatively high level of uncertainty during the evaluation process. It relies on creating a space in which people feel safe and comfortable to fully explore opportunities as they arise and to speak honestly about their experiences.

Some of our stakeholders were more comfortable in this space than others. Those who were less comfortable tended to be very keen to pin down elements of the different projects very precisely, and to seek to create a controlled environment where specific variables could be rigorously examined in isolation. This level of science is very difficult – and not necessarily helpful – in a formative process, where change is a big part of what you are trying to achieve – and evaluate.

There is also a significant danger of over-reaction. Interim reporting is intended to provide information back to participants, to help them learn about how they are going and change their practices. This is essentially a continuous improvement or organisational change process. Part of the evaluation is assessing how well this works – which processes and structures support ongoing improvement and which do not.

This can only be assessed over time. Strong reactions to individual data cycles prevent the evaluation from developing a bigger-picture understanding of what is going on, and why. Data cycles are designed to draw attention to areas of strength and weakness – but they can be interpreted as ‘mini final reports’ making definitive statements about overall successes or failures. This can lead to ‘knee jerk’ reactions on the basis of short-term or partial data, which undermine the evaluation process.

Overall, our biggest lesson from this project is around making sure that everyone involved understands the benefits – and limitations – of a formative approach to evaluation from the very beginning. It won’t deliver the precise science possible with a retrospective or summative approach – but it can offer far deeper insights, and much greater practical influence, towards a deep understanding of what works, what doesn’t and why.