## Evaluation as Work In Progress: Stories of Shared Learning and Development

*Fletcher Gillian (PhD); Dyson, Suzanne (PhD)*

*Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society*

*La Trobe University*

*g.fletcher@latrobe.edu.au*

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**Abstract**

In a political climate that prioritises ‘evidence’ for program funding, evaluation is often a funding expectation. Community programs struggle to find resources for external evaluation, but internal evaluation often lacks credibility. The presenters have developed an approach that carries the credibility of external evaluation while retaining the cost effectiveness of internal evaluation.

The presenters argue that this model—which involves the evaluators contributing to ongoing project learning, in keeping with constructivist and transformative theories of learning and evaluation—adds value to the evaluation process, for all parties. They will also report on the implications of such an approach in terms of additional complications resulting for the evaluator, specifically in terms of the reflexivity required to evaluate one’s own participation in the learning process, and in terms of role boundaries.

**Introduction**

This article describes an evaluation practice–and evaluation challenges–shared by two authors who, on the face of it, have limited commonalities. We come from different career trajectories (nursing into academia and journalism into academia, albeit in both instances via several detours); different continents (Australia and Europe); different work areas (sexuality education and international development); and different disciplinary backgrounds (women’s studies and applied linguistics). We share an employer, the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, and—as has become increasingly apparent through our evaluation work—we also share a commitment to social justice, and to the principles of transformative learning. We share an epistemology in which there is no one objective truth to be found when one is involved in attempting to interpret human experience. To borrow from Taylor: ‘This is a domain to which there is no dispassionate access’ (1985: 62).

The goals, philosophies and epistemology that both underscored our pre-academic work and continue to play a role in our work today are best represented by principles of fourth generation, constructivist evaluation as described by Guba and Lincoln and a number of other evaluators in recent decades (Guba and Lincoln, 1989; McGarvey, [2004] 2006; Preskill and Torres, 2000). Guba and Lincoln (1989: 43) described the epistemology of fourth generation evaluation thus:

’…the constructivist paradigm denies the possibility of subject-object dualism, suggesting instead that the findings of a study exist precisely because there is an interaction between observer and observed that literally creates what emerges from that inquiry.

This requires a strong partnership between the program staff and the evaluator as well as a focus on hands-on, continuous learning for all. What is learned from the evaluation is fed back to stakeholders and what is learned in the field is fed back to the evaluator. Other features include asking questions based on tacit as well as explicit knowledge—unspoken or implied knowledge defines a good deal of the culture of a system and incorporation multiple points of view—in order to gain a broad understanding of what is going on.

In a political climate that prioritises ‘evidence’ for funding, funding contracts often explicitly require (or carry an expectation of) program or project evaluation. Yet community-based programs are often left struggling to find either the resources for an external evaluation or the skills they need to carry out an internal evaluation (which can also be seen as lacking credibility). Our approach has been to work with community organisations to support and assist them to carry out research that carries the credibility of external evaluation, the cost effectiveness of internal evaluation and recognition of the social nature of the programs at hand. Such social programs are not stable like laboratory settings and are open to many external factors which cannot be accounted for or measured using ‘objective’ measures (Kippax and Stephenson, 2005).

This paper will reflect on the constructivist evaluation of two programs from Victoria, Australia, that use sport as a vehicle for building cultures of respect. The first program promotes safety for, and inclusion of, women within one sporting code; the second program promotes safety for, and inclusion of, people of all sexualities and gender identities. The evaluation process in both programs will be described, and the authors will then reflect on the challenges (and benefits) experienced during the evaluation process.

### Project One: A culture change intervention in a community sporting organisation to prevent violence against women.

Violence against women is one of the least visible yet most widespread forms of violence in Australia. One in five women in Australia experience sexual assault by the age of 15 years. Domestic violence is the leading contributor of death, illness and disability in women aged 15 to 44 years and in 2009 the estimated cost of violence against women was $13.6 billion. Research has shown that where relationships between men and women are equal and based on respect then the rates of violence against women are reduced. Because some male dominated sports have been associated with attitudes and behaviours that support violence against women sport has been identified as a platform for shifting attitudes on the community (Dyson and Grzelinska, 2010). In 2008 VicHealth funded a two year intervention in AFL Victoria as part of the AFL’s Respect and Responsibility program.

This project was initially funded for two years and subsequently for a further four years to serially introduce culture change in three community sporting leagues as a strategy to prevent violence against women. The intervention was based on community development principles and involved 44 clubs in one league in the first two years, and similar numbers in two more leagues over the following years. The project is due for completion in 2013. A head office project manager was engaged, as was a community development manager in the first intervention league. Both of these positions were add-ons to existing roles held by the workers in the organisation, which was seen as having the advantage of them being trusted and known to participants. On the other hand the evaluator, Sue Dyson, was a complete outsider and had little knowledge of the context of the organisation or the sport. Clubs were invited to participate and asked to nominate project ‘champions’ who would be responsible for identifying and driving change in their clubs, with the goal of making them safer and more inclusive for women and girls. Champions were then taken through training to understand the project, their role and how to implement the intervention.

Supplementing the evaluation methods in the proposal to the funding body with a collaborative approach, the evaluator became embedded in the project team. Initially meeting with and interviewing all the stakeholders in the state peak body for the sport's community clubs and the participating league, and then attending all sessions for community club representatives with the project team. As a result the evaluator became a visible, trusted member of the team in the first year, and was invited to attend staff meetings, training sessions and observing at public events held by clubs. During this phase the evaluator used an ethnographic approach (Mobley, 1997) in addition to setting up surveys in the intervention league and a comparable control league and identifying three clubs for closer scrutiny including stakeholder interviews, member interviews and club observations.

By the end of the first year it became apparent that there were problems with the project in that it was not meeting its objectives and that the feedback that was needed was not simple ‘tweaking’ but a radical overhaul of the approach being used. This, however, presented a personal dilemma for the evaluator. She had become part of the team, understood what was going on and could see where some of the problems lay, but she would have to communicate some hard truths to a group which had accepted and trusted her. Because she had a deep understanding of the context as a result of being embedded in the evaluation she was able to devise a process in which feedback could be provided to the organisation and the team which enabled early intervention. After careful consideration a written report was developed and a short version consisting of key points was drawn up to assist communicating the problems. It was decided to recruit the organisation’s leader for feedback initially, and work out a strategy with him for how to proceed with communicating the information more widely. With trepidation a meeting was set up in neutral territory, and several hours later a strategy was in place to communicate the evaluation results with program staff and to the funding body. This collaborative approach to providing feedback proved to be accepted by all the stakeholders involved, and led to a restructuring of the staffing and many small changes in the intervention. It also led to the intervention and evaluation being funded for a further four years. Both the organisation being evaluated and the funding body shifted away from a rigid adherence to positivist evaluation methods and now support collaborative evaluation and seek it as a methodology in other projects. One worker was taken off the project and returned to her former position in the organisation. A year after this occurred she wrote the evaluator a personal note to the effect that she appreciated the feedback she received in the evaluation and had found it constructive in her (very successful) career.

### Project Two: increasing awareness of sexual and gender diversity and promoting safe and inclusive environments in one sporting code.

It is beyond doubt that sport can be a site of discrimination on the grounds of someone’s (known or assumed) sexuality or gender identity. Experiences of harassment, discrimination and exclusion have been documented in multiple international and Australian reports and research projects (Baks and Malecek, 2004; Sartore and Cunningham, 2009; Symons et al., 2010; Walsh et al., 2008). The Commonwealth Government-funded Australian Sports Commission (ASC) has been forthright in acknowledging homophobia in sport and, in 2000, published *Harassment-free Sport: Guidelines to Address Homophobia and Sexuality Discrimination in Sport.*

Fair, Go, Sport! —a pilot project being implemented in Victoria by the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC) in partnership with Hockey Victoria (HV), Hockey Australia (HA), and the ASC—aims ‘to increase awareness of sexual and gender diversity in hockey and promote safe and inclusive environments, and develop a flexible model of engagement that can be adapted for other sporting codes and their governing bodies’ (VEOHRC, 2010). The initial ASC funding was for just one year; this was extended by four months in recognition of the need for the project to be in place throughout the run-up to, and implementation of, a whole hockey season. The project is due to finish in late 2011.

The project matrix, developed by key project stakeholders in collaboration with evaluator Gillian Fletcher, was built on an expressed desire by those involved that the project should look for positive possibilities for change, rather than focus on the problems experienced by those considered to be outside of sexuality and gender norms. This type of approach to culture change work is defined as asset-based; it is an approach in which ‘respect for self, others and the team’ is maximised and project participants are encouraged to internalise ‘the message that they can do something’ (Dyson and Flood, 2008: 8). Consistent with this overall asset-based approach, the project adopted action learning as its primary methodology. At its base, action learning means exactly what the name implies: ‘learning from action or concrete experience, as well as taking action as a result of this learning’ (Zuber-Skerritt, 2001: 2). There is a dynamic, iterative and, again, asset-based cycle of examination, learning, action, examination, learning, and so on. What positive experiences exist? What positive change *might* be possible?

The Fair Go, Sport! project is considerably smaller in scale and shorter in duration than the first case study described in this article. Given the timescale, and the structurally embedded issue of homophobia in sport—tied as it is to gender norms in relation to ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’—the project seeks to be realistic in its proposed overall aim (described above). Nonetheless, it strives to *initiate* processes of change at three levels: club level, State hockey association level (HV) and national sporting organisation level (HA and ASC).

At a club level, the main focus is on four, volunteer, project pilot clubs. Processes of change in these clubs are being initiated through the work of volunteer Project Advocates (PAs). Each of the pilot clubs is finding its own response to the project, while learning from the others. For instance when players at one club suggested the development of rainbow socks, to be worn on the pitch as a way of raising awareness of the project and of the issues of inclusiveness and safety, PAs from other clubs immediately picked up the idea and circulated it within their own clubs. At HV level, the project has the direct involvement of the CEO. HV has been proactive in communicating with clubs, organising Fair Go, Sport! events (including holding the project official launch as part of a women’s league inter state match), identifying and (in collaboration with HA) liaising with Project Champions, including two former Olympic Hockeyroos. HV also approved a uniform change in record time, in order to allow the wearing of rainbow socks at a special Fair Go, Sport! club event. Representatives of HA and the ASC have joined gay, lesbian, bisexual and intersex (GLBTI) community representatives on the project Steering Committee. Other State and Territory hockey associations are also showing interest in the project, and Hockey ACT has organised a Fair Go, Sport! cup at one of its interstate matches.

All of the above work is supported, encouraged and enabled by the Project Officer. In turn, the evaluation design involves the Project Officer in a regular reflection session with the lead evaluator. During these reflection sessions, the Project Officer is encouraged to follow the action learning ethos in that he: identifies his experience of the project since the previous reflection meeting; reflects on those experiences; then (with evaluator probing and feedback) considers the way forward. The evaluation also involves collection of related project documents; interviews with 10-15 representatives of non-pilot clubs (to see if the project has had any impact at a club level beyond the pilot clubs); and the facilitation of workshops covering all three levels of implementation in order to identify features of the ‘flexible model’ required by the project aims. In addition, the lead evaluator also completed a literature review on homophobia in sport and assisted in development of a short survey, intended to inform project activities.

### Challenges shared, benefits accrued

Despite the differences between the two projects described above in terms of overall project aim, size, timescale, and implementation, clear similarities emerged when we reflected on the challenges we had both faced and the benefits that we have seen accrue (both to the projects evaluated and to our professional practice and personal commitment to change). Both challenges and benefits can be summarised within two main headings: relationships, and expectations. We will deal with each of these in turn.

#### Relationships

The relational benefit of collaborative evaluation is considered by both evaluators to be enormous. As the project teams came to know and trust the evaluator, open and frank communication increased. The evaluators were inside the project ‘information loops’ and, as such, were much more able to assist with timely and trusted reflections on process and weaknesses of project implementation. We were privy to, and trusted with, what might otherwise have remained inside knowledge.

Nonetheless, such relationships of trust also placed the evaluators at the centre of a constant juggling act. We felt personally responsible to the members of the project team, we were financially, personally and professionally responsible to the project funders, and we were professionally responsible for delivery of a rigorous evaluation report that did not shirk from presenting ‘warts and all’.

#### Expectations

In any project, there are multiple and often contradictory expectations. In both of the case study projects, there was an expectation that community members would lead the projects; however there was also an anxiety on the part of staff members in both projects related to whether or not community members would be *able* to meet that expectation. The evaluators found themselves in the role of having to encourage staff members to have trust in the community members, and to hold back and create a space for genuine grassroots activities as opposed to rushing in and acting on a fear that they needed to ‘fill the void’.

The strengthening of relationships of trust between the evaluators and the project teams led to an increase in expectations of access to the evaluators’ time, ideas and expertise. There was a definite benefit here, in that this increased demand was evidence of project stakeholders’ awareness of the value of the evaluator. The challenges came in the form of how to set boundaries (on oneself and on others); how to avoid being taken for granted; and how to gently let people know that, while the work that *leads to* an analytic ‘moment’ may be invisible, it is, indeed, hard and time-consuming work. Hopefully the project teams saw our analysis as swans gliding along, but we were well aware of just how hard we were both paddling to manage the analytic work, build and maintain open and trusting relationships, provide thoughtful feedback, and manage the wealth of data constantly arising.

### Conclusion

For the projects described in this article, collaborative evaluation has contributed to: higher levels of accountability within the project team; stronger inter-project relationships; increased knowledge sharing within (and outside of) the project; and stronger outcomes than if the evaluation findings were presented only at the end of the project cycle, too late for reflection and review. It has also provided particular challenges for the evaluators, specifically in terms of the reflexivity required to evaluate one’s own participation in the learning process, and in terms of maintenance of role boundaries and management of one’s own, and other people’s, expectations. For practitioners and researchers who seek to employ these methods in evaluation, an awareness of the potential personal and professional pitfalls of having close relationships with those who are working on programs they are evaluating is essential. This can be overcome by professional debriefing and reflection, which should always be a part of the evaluation process.

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