**WALKING THE LINE BETWEEN IMPARTIALITY AND PARTICIPATION**

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This paper was presented at the Australasian Evaluation Society

International Conference, Sydney, Australia, 29 August – 2 September 2011.

# Abstract

Participatory evaluations that involve staff and stakeholders in analysing data and developing recommendations are often highly influential by way of their process of influencing participants and the recommendations to be implemented. However, participatory approaches to evaluation often present evaluators with the challenge of juggling the need for robust, independent evaluation while meaningfully involving program staff and participants. Using the example of the ‘Green Steps’ Program, this paper presents a methodology that was used to try and achieve the delicate balance of evaluating a program in a participatory and yet impartial way.

Green Steps is a ‘hands-on’ education and leadership program designed to empower its participants with the skills and knowledge to drive environmental change and work towards a sustainable future. At the time of its evaluation, the Program was in its tenth year and there was a need for program staff and participants to understand what the Program had achieved over time. Concurrently, funders of the Program wanted to understand the effectiveness of the Program’s business model and help it transition to a more economically, self sustaining model. This situation resulted in the need to balance a certain level of independence in the evaluation with the Green Steps culture of inclusivity, empowerment and ownership. To deal with this challenge, the evaluation design included mixed methods collected by an external evaluator accompanied by three participatory workshops that allowed staff and keys stakeholders to engage at a number of key points in the evaluation process. These methods were used to ensure that an external evaluation was culturally appropriate to the Green Steps Program where high levels of participation and ownership are the norm. The evaluation was highly influential and resulted in evaluation recommendations feeding directly into a strategic planning process. This paper describes the methodology used along with the challenges and achievements associated with attempting to ‘walk the line’ between impartiality and participation.

# Introduction

There are many evaluators that subscribe to participatory or utilisation driven approaches to evaluation (for key examples see Wadsworth 1993, Patton 1997, 2007, Dart 1998, 2008) due to the highly positive influence they can have on individual, program and organisational change. In many situations, the benefits of participatory evaluation far outweigh what is learned or gained by conducting an independent evaluation or review. However, in reality, organisations and evaluators are often faced with the challenge of satisfying the needs of funders or high level executives who require independent evaluation for accountability purposes. As such, there is often a tension between the need for independent evaluation and participatory or utilisation-driven approaches.

Using the recent example of an evaluation of the Green Steps Program, this paper outlines a methodology we have found effective in ‘walking the line’ between independence and participation in evaluation. The paper discusses the broader theoretical context for the evaluation approach and summarises the key benefits and lessons learned from the process.

# Participatory evaluation versus independent evaluation

It is thought that participatory approaches to evaluation facilitate greater utilisation of evaluation outputs and make evaluation more meaningful for those busy implementing programs (Dart 1998; Parkes and Panelli 2001). Patton (2002) argues that the participation of stakeholders throughout an evaluation will serve to increase the impact of learning outcomes, and ultimately, increase the chance of learning being applied.

Similarly, it is thought that the process of implementing an evaluation can be an intervention in itself (Guba and Lincoln 1989). Supporting this, Patton (2002) suggests that through approaches such as action research, the process used to obtain evaluation findings may be more important than the findings themselves.

Wadsworth’s (1993) description of the action research cycle closely mirrors the ‘program cycle’ of ‘plan’, ‘do’ and ‘act’ (see Figure 1) which is a standard construct amongst many program practitioners. This cycle incorporates monitoring and evaluation (M&E) through the assessment of actions and the incorporation of results, or lessons learned, into subsequent cycles of action.

Action research strongly encourages an environment where evaluators (or researchers) and practitioners work together as co-researchers with support for participant engagement in the study itself (Wadsworth 1993, King and Lonquist 1994, cited in Patton 2002, p183). In this regard, many program evaluations take on the characteristics of action research with program participants actively participating in the design of the study through to the implementation of its findings (Whyte 1991).



Figure The action research or program cycle including M&E modified from Wadsworth (1993)

Both action research and participatory approaches to evaluation are also closely aligned to empowerment evaluation (Wandersman et al. 2005) which is driven by the improvement of people, programs and organisations and promotes stakeholder ownership, inclusion and shared decision-making, organisational learning, social justice goals and places value on community knowledge. Indeed, in his discussion of action research, McTaggert (1997) talks about collaboration at all stages of the research process, having open-mindedness about the findings that emerge and involving the wider community. Importantly for ‘walking the line’ of participation and independence, all three approaches also incorporate evidence-based strategies, empirical justification and the idea of accountability for program expectations.

While action research and participatory approaches to evaluation are ideal in many situations, particularly where learning and improvement are key, there are many instances where they are less appropriate (Patton 2002). Indeed, many evaluators consider independent evaluations more credible and robust than those which directly involve program participants (Mathison 2005, p199). Scriven (1991) makes a strong argument for independent evaluation in his discussion of goal-free evaluation, suggesting that evaluations should not test the intentions of managers or developers of programs, but rather the benefits of a program to its clients or the recipients. As such, the evaluator should be external to the program and equipped to make independent judgements from the perspective of the consumer, beneficiary or client.

From our experience in designing and implementing evaluations, participatory approaches are also less appropriate where funders or program staff require an independent assessment or when staff have insufficient time, resources or capacity to participate. Interestingly, clients who request independent evaluation studies are often keen for a process and results that are meaningful and useful, sensitive to context and that lead to learning and improvement. Such outcomes can be difficult to achieve without some degree of participation.

The evaluation of Green Steps is a salient example of a program that needed an independent evaluation to satisfy external audience needs but which also wanted a participatory study to ensure internal ownership of the process and findings. The following sections outline how the evaluators ‘walked the line’ between independence and participation in this particular context.

# Green Steps: A case study

Green Steps is a national education and leadership program run by Monash Sustainability Institute to empower participants with the skills and knowledge to drive environmental change and a sustainable future.Established in 2000, Green Steps offers a ‘hands on’ experience, including workshop-based training in sustainability coupled with an internship (for university students) or ongoing support (for organisations) to ‘kick start’ sustainability projects and progress participants’ careers in sustainability. The Program has also grown to provide a professional training and consulting service.

*Overview of the evaluation*

The purpose of the Green Steps evaluation was to 1) explore the impact of the Program on its participants, 2) document the achievements of its ten year lifespan, and 3) examine the viability and relevance of the Program’s business model. As noted earlier, there was a need for the evaluation to deliver independent results while providing opportunities for stakeholder participation to promote ownership and learning. These needs were addressed at the overarching level through a) the engagement of an external evaluator to design and implement the evaluation, and b) the external evaluator facilitating a range of opportunities for Program stakeholders to participate in the evaluation process. The evaluation was structured around five steps (Figure 1) which differed in their level of stakeholder participation (Table 1). The following sections outline the details of each step, including the benefits and lessons learned from their implementation.

Figure 2 Evaluation steps

Table 1 Level of stakeholder participation in the evaluation

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Step** | **Level of participation**  | **Who participated** |
| 1 | High | Program staff, past participants, reference committee and external evaluator as facilitator |
| 2 | Low | External evaluator, program stakeholders as interviewees |
| 3a | Low | External evaluator |
| 3b | High | Program staff, past participants, reference committee and external evaluator as facilitator |
| 4 | Low | External evaluator |
| 5 | High | Program staff, reference committee and external evaluator as facilitator |

# Step 1: Plan

In this step the Green Steps team met with the external evaluator to agree on the details of the evaluation. This was followed by a participatory planning workshop facilitated by the external evaluator in which staff and past participants validated an existing program logic model, clarified the purpose of the evaluation, developed key evaluation and survey questions and identified stakeholders for consultation in Step 2. Participants also discussed the best ways to engage with stakeholders in Step 2. The workshop was held on a weekend to maximise the participation of past participates who volunteered their time to attend the session. The evaluator documented the information from these sessions in an evaluation plan.

The planning workshop was a critical step in engendering ownership of the evaluation amongst program staff and past participants. Key benefits included:

* Development of a shared ‘language’ for the evaluation and the Program itself
* Participants gained an understanding of how the evaluation would be useful for them
* Participants further clarified the requirements of their external evaluation audience, particularly with regard to independent data collection
* Participants gained increased understanding of the data collection and analysis process ensuring ‘no surprises’ in the subsequent phases of the evaluation
* The workshop provided space for participants to reflect on Green Steps and its future which also helped to increase their enthusiasm for the evaluation.

Important lessons for future practice from this step include:

* The importance of managing stakeholder expectations about what an evaluation can and cannot deliver
* The need for flexible timing to maximise participation, i.e. running sessions out of hours
* The importance of sharing workshop outputs with stakeholders likely to be involved in subsequent stages of the evaluation
* The value of engaging with key program staff out-of-session to refine the evaluation plan developed from the outputs of the planning workshop.

# Step 2: Data collection

In Step 2, data was collected via a range of methods, including: 1) semi-structured interviews, 2) a review of existing data, 3) an internet survey and 4) a review of the Green Steps business model (including direct inquiry with experts and a secondary review of best practice models). This step was largely conducted by the external evaluator with some input from program staff to purposefully select and gain access to interviewees.

A total of 38 people were interviewed, including 20 interviews with past participants and internship host organisations, 12 interviews with program-level informants (e.g. trainers and staff members), and six interviews with external ‘experts’ selected for their recognised expertise in business and administration of related programs.

In ‘walking the line’, the key benefits of this step included:

* The independent conduct of interviews which allowed informants to talk openly about the strengths and limitations of Green Steps
* All interviews were conducted and analysed by one interviewer which ensured consistency in interview technique and analysis
* Independent data collection gave program stakeholders greater confidence in the results of the study.

A key lesson from this step was the importance of allowing plenty of time to pilot and revise interview questions to ensure they are appropriately nuanced. In the case of the Green Steps evaluation, the external evaluator tested the key questions with a small number of interviewees which also helped in the development of appropriate probing questions.

# Steps 3: Analyse (a and b)

**Step 3 was conducted in two parts: 1) preliminary independent analysis of all data sources, and 2) participatory analysis at a ‘summit workshop’.**

##### Step 3a: Preliminary independent analysis

The external evaluator conducted a thematic analysis of the interview data and generated descriptive statistics from the internet survey. These analyses were documented in a number of data summaries, including a summary of program performance in relation to the Green Steps logic model, a series of stories of change[[1]](#footnote-1), a summary of the areas for improvement and a description of alternative options for the Green Steps business model.

##### Step 3b: Participatory analysis

The data summaries were presented to a cross-section of Green Steps stakeholders at an ‘evaluation summit workshop’ which was used to validate the preliminary findings, engender ownership of the results of the evaluation and increase the likelihood of their use.

An evaluation summit is a facilitated and scalable group workshop in which program stakeholders examine evaluation data and deliberate to identify the strengths of a program and key areas for improvement. Together, these analyses are often woven into recommendations which reflect the values of the participants.

The evaluation summit technique was developed by Clear Horizon Consulting and is informed by Appreciative Inquiry (AI) (Cooperrider and Whitney 2002) and the Most Significant Change Technique (MSC) (Dart and Davies 2003). The technique is also a key component of Collaborative Outcomes Reporting, or, the Participatory Performance Story Reporting methodology (Dart 2008).

The first part of a summit workshop heavily draws on the ideas of AI which was developed as a tool for organisational change to motivate and energise staff (Preskill and Catsambas 2006). AI involves participants drawing on their positive experiences for inspiration and to identify opportunities for continuous improvement (Cooperrider and Whitney 2002).

In the Green Steps summit, participants began with an analysis of 1) the Program’s overall performance combined with 2) an analysis of a series of stories of change to identify the positive results of the Program. The next stage involved small groups of participants selecting a most significant story from the larger collection of stories based on their shared values. The purpose of this activity was also informed by the MSC technique, deviant case sampling and AI, and was intended to create dialogue between participants about their (sometimes competing) values, to distil participants’ criteria for success, and to promote learning from the ‘best’ results from the Program.

Following the analysis of the achievements of Green Steps, participants analysed and ranked the areas for improvement to ensure a balanced appraisal of the Program. Participants also reviewed and commented on the relative appropriateness of the of alternate business models.

Finally, the ideas generated through the workshop were used as a basis for brainstorming likely future directions for Green Steps. A voting process was used to isolate the most highly valued options which the external evaluator incorporated into recommendations tabled in the evaluation report.

The key benefits of the summit workshop were:

* Participants validated the accuracy of the preliminary findings
* It convened a cross-section of program stakeholders to reflect on and celebrate the program
* It inspired stakeholders to work harder to generate ongoing program success
* It prompted participants to consider how Green Steps could be improved without having to wait for a formal evaluation report
* The data and participatory analysis affirmed the appropriateness of a number of new activities recently implemented by the Program
* The data summaries and outputs of the workshop were directly translated into the evaluation report which helped to ensure ‘no surprises’ in the next step of the evaluation.

The key lessons from the summit workshop were:

* Participant scrutiny and questioning of the evaluation data are important for validating the preliminary findings but can lead to confusion and debate in a workshop setting if not well facilitated
* It is important to be discerning about the quantity of data given to participants; participants need enough information to undertake a sensible and robust analysis, but not too much that they are left exhausted. This is particularly important where participants are volunteering their time
* It is important to factor-in additional time between Steps 3 and 4 to conduct additional verification if required.

##### Step 4: Report

A comprehensive evaluation report was submitted to Green Steps staff which was used to report to funders and inform the program reference committee. The report incorporated the recommendations developed at the summit workshop and the stories selected by the workshop participants.

The key benefits of the evaluation report were:

* There were no surprises due to the use of the summit workshop to expose the evaluation findings and provide stakeholders with an opportunity to validate and ascribe value to them
* The inclusion of both independent findings and the ideas generated at the summit workshop ensured a balance between independent and ‘ground up’ assessments. Both types of findings were clearly identified to ensure transparency.

The key lessons from this step were:

* The importance, and sometimes necessity, to work with program staff to finesse the language of the report
* While appreciating the role of participatory analysis in the Green Steps evaluation, some audiences were distracted by the explicit inclusion of ideas from the summit workshop (in the report) and suggested this detracted from the ‘independence’ of the report. Interestingly, the majority of ideas from the summit corresponded with those of the external evaluator.

##### Step 5: Re-design

The re-design workshop was conducted two months after the completion of the evaluation with a small group of core Green Steps stakeholders. The workshop was designed to embed the results of the evaluation in the design and ongoing implementation of the program. Two members of the Green Steps reference committee were present at the workshop to provide advice and oversight. The workshop was facilitated by the external facilitator.

The key components of the workshop were:

* Reflection on the evaluation process and overall findings
* Examination of the program logic model in relation to the evaluation findings
* Action planning in relation to the recommendations tabled in the evaluation report.

The outputs of the workshop were fed into the Green Steps two-year business plan and a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) plan for the Program.

The key benefits of the workshop were:

* It helped to ‘close the loop’ between program implementation, evaluation, reflection and program improvement
* Evidence from the evaluation was used to inform the two-year business plan
* It provided an opportunity to prioritise the recommendations from the evaluation
* ‘Real time’ business planning occurred in the workshop based on the results of the evaluation
* It enabled the external evaluator to very easily develop an M&E framework.

The important lessons learned from this step were:

* The importance of appropriate timing; if the workshop had not occurred during a program planning phase, it may not have been as effective
* The need for a flexible workshop process, particularly if the program ‘landscape’ has changed since the submission of the evaluation report; these changes and the needs of program stakeholders should be taken into account when designing the workshop to maximise its value.

# Conclusions

The evaluation of Green Steps resulted in a successful balance between independent evaluation and stakeholder participation. Walking the line between impartiality and participation was relatively easy due to the commitment of Green Steps staff and stakeholders. In fact, the enthusiasm of staff and stakeholders was infectious and increased the commitment of the evaluation team to the participatory elements of the evaluation.

The three participatory workshops conducted as part of the evaluation played a significant role in increasing the influence of the evaluation. By involving program stakeholders throughout the evaluation there was a strong level of ownership and contribution to decision making by all those involved. Learning occurred throughout the process as dialogue was nurtured along the way.

In addition, the independent components of the evaluation (i.e. data collection, analysis and reporting) gave the evaluation credibility with a wider audience and satisfied the needs of funders and the Green Steps reference committee. The report was considered a useful reference document that will be used into the future.

Finally, the most important lesson from this study is the importance of understanding the culture of the program or organisation being evaluated. Green Steps has a strong culture of inclusivity, participation and continual improvement which rendered the participatory elements of this evaluation so successful. In other organisations however, this may not be the case, and the level of participation, including the pros and cons, should be explored with program staff before committing to such a process. The line between impartiality and participation can certainly be blurred; getting the right balance is a challenge that needs to be actively discussed and managed from the inception of an evaluation through to the sign-off of the final evaluation report.

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1. First-person narratives derived from interview transcripts to illustrate the various impacts of the Program. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)