

Evaluation through storytelling

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Summary

Effective evaluation makes use of a range of evaluation tools and processes, with a view to collecting both quantitative and qualitative data to support the evaluation process. This paper addresses the use of storytelling dialogue as one of the evaluation tools used to collect qualitative data. It discusses the effectiveness and credibility of the storytelling approach and explores the further potential of storytelling within evaluation.

Keywords

Storytelling, formative evaluation, qualitative evaluation, impact, development and innovation.

Formative evaluation

Effective evaluation should contribute to the learning and development process, rather than simply ticking boxes and informing managers about where a course programme or development project has 'passed' or 'failed'. Through the use of a number of evaluation processes the evaluator has the benefit of inside knowledge about all aspects of the work, without being 'bogged down' by the day-to-day operations. Thus it is possible to encourage key players, participants and stakeholders to reflect on what is happening, thereby identifying good practice, enabling strategies and areas of constraint or conflict. Formative evaluation contributes to the learning process; in short, the external evaluator might be seen as a 'critical friend'.

The evaluation process considers impact, through observation, collecting quantitative and qualitative data, focus groups, questionnaires, documentation review and utilising other evaluation tools and processes. Formative evaluation will also consider added value, partnership (as appropriate), the development process and the extent to which original aims and objectives have been met or revised. Experience shows that in many cases evaluation activities add to staff motivation, providing an opportunity to reflect on what has been done, recognise achievements, discuss both short-term and longer-term priorities and 'brainstorm' future challenges.

To summarise, formative evaluation can:

- encourage key players and participants to reflect;
- observe and seek opinions;
- consider the impact of a project;
- identify good practice, enabling strategies and areas of constraint or conflict;
- look at the added value;
- recognise achievements;
- discuss both short and longer-term priorities;
- 'brainstorm' future challenges;
- contribute to the learning and development process.

One of the evaluation tools successfully used in the evaluation of community development projects and learning programmes in Belfast is that of storytelling. This has been practiced with both those delivering programmes or implementing community development projects and with learners and beneficiaries.

Storytelling

The challenge for innovative development projects is to demonstrate to stakeholders (including communities, individuals and funding agencies) and beneficiaries how specific programmes or projects can produce positive benefits and have a real impact. In areas of social disadvantage and marginalisation people have heard the statistics many times; sometimes there is a need for something more to make people sit up and listen.

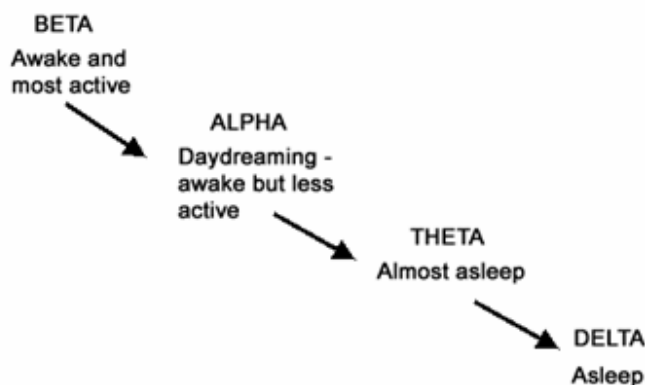
'Sharing stories is an important and valuable technique for problem solving, critical reflection and skill development' (Labonte and Feather (1996), Handbook on Using Stories in Health Promotion Practice, Prairie Region Health Promotion Research Centre). Labonte and Feather have used storytelling to demonstrate to communities and individuals how specific projects can produce positive benefits and have a real impact, particularly in relation to health promotion activities.

Richard A. Krueger states (see weblinks below) that 'the individual story is a fragment of data. A story gives us a glimpse of something at one point in time from one point of view - like one frame of a motion picture. Often the evaluator wants to present the larger picture and multiple perspectives'. However, stories can provide valid data when presented as part of the evaluation process and data.

Paolo Freire promoted the benefits of dialogue, conceptualisation and storytelling when working with disadvantaged and marginalized people; developing theories of 'critical consciousness' and 'popular education'; highlighting the power of language in shaping thoughts and actions.

Storytelling is an age-old tradition, stories have been passed down through generations of families as a way of explaining how things came to be; if you're lucky you may get in with a crowd of Irish people telling stories into the small hours of the morning or you may have found yourself telling a story to children as a means of explaining why there are rules. Good stories have an impact on the listener, and can encourage them to think about the message. Jan Stewart explains why stories work as a medium, in terms of the working of the human brain. In brief, stories are taken in and understood at the brain's first attention level, which occurs when the brain is in the Beta state. The diagram shows the four basic brain states:

Brain states



When a person is listening to a story, both sides of the brain are working. The left side of the brain processes the words whilst the right side actively fills in the gaps. A good story uses 'visual, auditory, kinesthetic and olfactory words to give the story depth and to stimulate the right brain to enrich the meaning of the story and store it in the memory for easy recall'. Good stories can also engage the second attention level, as the brain searches for a deeper meaning. Processing the story can take place in either the beta or alpha state, but it is an unconscious process. The second attention level is 'where the story is reformulated to have personal relevance. Sometimes the story stays at this level and causes unconscious behavioural change, or it can rise into the first attention level through an 'A-ha!' reaction'.

Storytelling as an evaluation tool

Using stories as an evaluation tool to gain quantitative data can:

- provide human points of contact;
- encourage reflection;
- be about people and what they do;
- touch us in ways statistics cannot;
- be culturally acceptable - all cultures have story-telling traditions;
- provide qualitative data;
- develop a deeper understanding about the world around us.

The goals of using storytelling in evaluation include:

- tapping into knowledge that practitioners gain through reflection on their own experiences;
- providing an environment that enables people to tell their stories;
- helping practitioners to share their practice knowledge with one another more effectively;
- creating more generalised knowledge about practice, from practice, for practice;
- incorporating practice knowledge in project evaluation.

The data gained from the stories can be used:

- in reports to Management Board;
- to support presentations;
- in publicity material;
- to highlight key lessons;
- by staff to reflect on delivery, what worked well, or what could have been done differently?
- as 'real life' examples when talking about the programme or project, ie putting it in context for the individual or community;
- to generate future ideas for further development.

Using storytelling: methods and techniques

Using storytelling as an evaluation tool in practice is relatively straightforward, provided that the people in question are aware of what is being done and why. It is necessary for there to be a high element of trust between the story-tellers and the evaluator such that people are willing to be open. The basic process involves:

- arranging a meeting with the staff team, with storytelling as the primary (often only) item on the agenda
- running a group session where individuals tell their stories
- reflecting on the stories as a group (very often one person's story will 'spark off' another story)
- drafting the stories report
- sending the report to the team to be checked for accuracy and anonymity (if appropriate)
- delivering and circulating the report

On occasion the stories told have been highly sensitive (in Northern Ireland, for example, this can be within a political context). Krueger points out that the evaluator should 'protect the storyteller from direct and indirect harm'. As such, the evaluator and/or the team may choose to reduce the content of the story; but in practice the issues raised have been addressed, less personally but none-the-less openly, within the evaluation report; and in practice this has led to developments in support of need.

The techniques used in storytelling include:

- using a structured dialogue;
- identifying triggers for group reflection;
- taking the opportunity for further analysis;
- asking probing questions:
 - what was done?
 - why was this done?
 - what was accomplished?
 - what can be learnt from this?

The 'Story Dialogue' method promoted by Labonte and Feather can be shown as:

Describe - Reflect - Explain - Synthesise - Act.

When working with staff to tell or 'craft' their story, some or all (depending on the time available) of the following questions can be addressed:

Describe:

- who was involved;
- the actions of the teller and others;
- when and where actions took place;
- what actions went smoothly;
- what actions were problematic or unexpected.

Explain:

- how this supports aims, objectives or outcomes;
- the impact of the actions;
- involvement of different groups and organisations;
- any tensions.

Reflection:

- approach - what worked, what could have been done differently?
- with the benefit of hindsight would you have done anything differently, and why?
- what could be added in place to support a similar situation in the future?
- what is transferable good practice?
- how can this experience be used to support the project?

In practice free-flow conversation or discussion often takes place, with the evaluator having the list of questions as a mental checklist to use as appropriate. Whilst storytelling often takes place as a group exercise, stories may also come out of individual interviews with staff.

Whether in a group or individual session, the evaluator should focus on how to ask questions, and how to document the stories. In the free-flow exchanges the emphasis should be on stimulating discussion and storytelling, whilst at the same time being aware of the aims of the stories, which should be informative and relevant to the development and implementation of the programme or project.

The Gender Evaluation Methodology (see GEM web links below) seeks for stories to provide information

- about the social and environmental context;
- about people / actors / gender;
- about the communities;
- that is contested.

GEM states that when "facilitating a guided conversation, it is important to keep in mind that we need to be focused on the story/experience we want to know more about and the clarity of questions we ask is important. At the same time, we must also try to keep a sense of equality between the person gathering the story and the person whose story is being sought. We need to allow the latter to create new questions and even take the discussion in directions that we may not have anticipated".

The way in which the stories are recorded should be considered. The checklist below (adapted from Krueger's checklist) considers a number of the elements to take into account:

- Record stories under several sub-headings; for example put similar stories together, or group stories under project/programme objectives;
- Think about the representativeness of the stories; are they typical, extreme cases, responding to special circumstances ...have examples been taken across the community or taken into account the different backgrounds of participants;
- Step back and look for patterns; discuss patterns and differences in the commentary;
- Compare results to other evaluation findings - stories should not be used in isolation;
- Address credibility and perception issues.

When providing a report consider whether it is best to include a lot of stories, in which case it may be advantageous if they are short and to the point. Alternatively document two or three long stories, and maybe use a couple of quotes from the other stories, which may support a story or offer an alternative perspective.

Conclusion

There is scope for further development in the use of stories, which can be recorded on audiotape or video. Equally there is the opportunity for further discussion about storytelling as an evaluation method.

The extent to which case stories are a robust and rigorous approach to evaluation could be discussed at length. Different people will have different perspectives on the same story; who is to say which perspective is the 'right' one? Very often community conflict can stem from people having a different perspective or understanding on any number of issues. At times the stories can be triangulated - ie the evaluator may hear the same story from a member of staff, a participant and an observer. When this happens it provides considerable evidence to support the evaluation process.

Stories cannot be used in isolation. Other evaluation processes need to be included to provide both quantitative and qualitative data. Stories have been used to good effect: to paint pictures, to show impact, to demonstrate innovation and to support numerical data. They have been used to identify issues, support project development, and facilitate reflection. The stories themselves have been used in reports, presentations and in promotional materials. Those hearing or reading the stories have said that they have gained a better understanding of the project or programme, as they can see for themselves what has been achieved.

Weblinks

Labonte: www.spheru.ca/Faculty%20Pages/Labonte%20HomePage.htm

Feather: www.usask.ca/healthsci/che/faculty/joan_feather.htm)

Krueger: www.tc.umn.edu/~rkrueger/story.html

GEM: <http://www.apcwomen.org/gem/resources/phase3-story-telling.html>

Stewart: www.tms.com.au/tms10r.html