

Nuggets Back from Newcastle

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Wet, windy, wild waves.
Huge bulk carriers anchored offshore awaiting tugboats to be guided down the Hunter.
Massive coal loading infrastructure silhouetted against grey skies.
Picturesque old port town.
Fine Hunter Valley wines.
University in beautiful bush setting.
Stimulating, engaging, enjoyable seminar.
Interesting, active, nice people at the Action Research Centre.
Good company.
Some good things to take back to the team and projects.



Evaluating Community Programs from a Strengths Perspective: Lessons, Challenges and Opportunities

Colleen, Maya and Anne went to Newcastle for a one day seminar "Evaluating Community Programs from a Strengths Perspective: Lessons, Challenges and Opportunities." It was run by the Family Action Centre which is part of the University of Newcastle and featured 3 speakers.

Tom Dewar describes himself as a community organiser, comes from Chicago, is currently based in Italy and is a faculty member of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute in Chicago. He is an engaging speaker who expertly crafted his talk to present 12 principles for evaluating community programs from a strengths perspective with each principle illustrated through his stories. Along the way he also managed to throw in some challenges such as most evaluation is ineffective, empowerment and self esteem are outsider terms. He's dubious about the popularity of the term partnerships too. What these words seem to have in common is that they are conceptual language – they do not describe or tell what is actually happening for participants.

The other two presenters, Wendy Lawrence and Alice Campbell, both work in Schools in Community Centres, a NSW Department of Education initiative to locate community centers in priority schools. These centres are aimed at improving outcomes for children from birth to 8 years through working from a community development strength based approach. Some things that occur in the centres are parenting groups, child health nurses and other local initiative projects. Wendy and Alice gave examples of two initiatives taken in their respective centres.

12 Principles for Evaluating Community Programs – Tom Dewar

Tom has 12 very practical, down to earth principles for evaluating community programs from a strengths perspective. While he did not mention the term action research, you will see they are congruous with an action research approach. They are:

1. Involve participants directly in the process.

- *ie the process of the design, conduct and presentation.*

2. Know your audience.

Focus on questions.

Make sure the evaluation is going to tell you some things you didn't already know.

Think about the political dimensions of the work. Who is this really for?

- *Focus your questions around what they really want to know. What they really want to know might not be the program question, might be more nuanced.*
- *Evaluation is a political and social process rather than a technical process. He thinks about **friends** of the work
supporters of the work
skeptics of the work
enemies of the work*
- *Trying to evaluate for **enemies** can be useless or even harmful
Trying to evaluate for **skeptics** can be very powerful. A goal might be to win over a few skeptics. It's important to widen the base of champions so think about getting the skeptics on side.
The **supporters** will mainly want to get some new information from the evaluation – they look to answer a question they may wonder about.
Friends will love you whatever you do*

3. Focus on what progress looks like and consider some "intermediate" outcomes.

- *While it is important to find some outcomes that really fit the goals, it is also important to track them. See how the work looks en route, how the work unfolds. A lot of outcome evaluation sets the bar too high.*

- *Assets based model often looks at how many people are active, contributing, engaged. The building blocks towards the final outcome. Tom pointed out that community mobilization efforts are not the only point – it is also about how things are being received in the community, how available things the project is offering are.*
- *In his book Tom says, “Thus, strong evaluations of asset-based community work require that more appropriate outcomes be identified and tracked. Ensuring that the choice of these outcomes reflects the full range of impact the project is achieving, as well as the developmental or step-by-step nature of the work, is one of the most important challenges appropriate evaluation faces” (Dewar, 1997, p32).*

4. Use stories (in preference over "analysis".)

- *Build on what people want to talk about. There are many tools for thoughtful story talking such as story circle (one aspect of your story or purposeful stories), story boards (put stories on a board and then people think about what this tells us around a certain question).*
- *If you use stories you must be disciplined about creating an honest space where people can tell their story and this may require several visits.*
- *Often stories can be about things that are happening outside programs. Tom suggests that maybe a good program is one that doesn't stop this, that programs at their best leave space for community and family ways*

5. Document some results as quickly as possible and share them.

- *Share findings and let people talk about them*

6. Develop some strong baseline evidence. Try to learn about how things change over time. That's often where the real stories are

- *Get lots of nominations for indicators worth tracking, give them a strengths based twist and then decide on a few – 2 or 3*
- *Try to learn how things change over time. That's often where the real stories are – the story is in the change over time.*
- *Heart of community work is about membership and how more of us can find way to make a little contribution. Tom thinks there is a problem with the focus on leaders who often like that role and talking about the problem but are actually not all that good at meeting with the people they are representing.*

7. Be descriptive.

- *“tell me what happened to you” (not about something else). What caused it? Describe, don't analyze it.*

8. Be graphic.

- *Think about how to make it into a picture – this is often what will be remembered by community and officials*
- *Identify strengths in the situation and find a way to illustrate*

9. Be open about shortcomings - both in the work itself and in how the evaluation is conducted.

- *Often the methods proposed in the evaluation do not work. Be open about the shortcomings if going to improve the work and the evaluation*

10. Share and discuss findings as the evaluation progresses - don't wait until the end.

- *Tom has never found the report to be the main thing. The most useful is where findings are heard as going along and can be used as going along.*
- *Try not to use professional language.*

11. Make sure the evaluation is do-able, and fun.

- *For example, Role plays, music, disposable cameras. Think about other ways people relate to the world*

12. Overall, try to underpromise and overdeliver.

- *Evaluation is a tool that on rare occasions can be helpful.*
- *Community work really is about other things*
- *Sometimes, in order to win the case for evaluation you promise more than you can deliver. This creates an evaluation that is painful rather than something that the community can use.*

Additional Discussion Points

Watch for Interesting Moments

- Remember the community building clock does not start the moment the program starts so look for things that might have begun before and look for things that happen outside the program hours that might be connected with it. Consider that behaviour change is not likely to be happening within the program, rather in other parts of people's lives.

Role of the External Evaluator

- Stand alongside, join, walk beside
- Have the time to keep track of things. Eg scribe,
- Catalytic outsider through "sustained naivety". Sustain your ignorance to avoid taking things for granted. Outsider can ask hard questions and has permission to keep things on the table.
- To do this really need to be there more than 3 times in 6 months

Remember, first do no harm.

Aboriginal Families Wellbeing Project – Wendy Lawrence

Wendy Lawrence, Co-ordinator, Alcazar, Schools in Community Centres, Windale Primary School

Wendy presented an example of a PAR project using a strengths based approach. It was a good illustration of how the process itself can be community strengthening and the rich resources that are in communities if we only know about them.

25% of the Windale population is Aboriginal. Tended to be separate from non-Aboriginal population. Wendy described a project that was aimed at the Aboriginal community identifying how they see themselves, how they wanted to be part of the school and to do this around their strengths. The application for funding was a strengths based application that did not state what the outcomes would be.

Trained 10 Aboriginal people from the community to interview the community.

Methods

- Did a workshop on interview techniques, recording, ethics etc
- Had administrative support in writing up interviews
- Interviewed the interviewer
- Reflection sessions

Evaluation included from beginning of the project.

- Held regular reflection sessions (sometimes nothing was happening and this was shared too).
- Often held around eating together.

- Important to have this space for stories to be told.
- Mapped growth and process of the participants. This way could see things that were not tangible.

Observations

- Indigenous people decided to take a non-Indigenous person to interview community members. This had effect of developing relationships between people who would not otherwise have known each other.
- Language very important – very important to be able to develop questions using local language/lingo and nuance
- You need to pay attention to what is happening or you can miss the incidental things.

Outcomes

- At end of 7 months had an assets based streets register of 47 families in the community. People had an amazing array of talents and skills, eg story telling, wood carving, dance, and these are now more accessible and available and known to the wider community.

Lessons Learned

- A sense of direction is required even though there are no stated outcomes
- Don't presume anything
- Make it fun. Interviewed the interviewers about how it was for them, skills they developed, took photos frequently and published them, collected stories and reflected on them.
- Strengths practice is about building relationships
- Report was a combination of rigour and reflection. Rigour = the assets based register, reflection = the stories
- Have to work/walk through the times when things are not working and people fall out.
- Get baseline evidence so can see the changes.
- Focus on what you are doing from the start. Document results as soon as possible.

Child-Led Evaluation: A Photovoice Case Study

Alice Campbell, Co-ordinator, Place of Friends, Schools in Community Centres, Woodberry Primary School

This was a fascinating account of how to use photos with children. It was a large scale project that involved separate funding and a high level of commitment.

This initiative began with the question, “How do we determine what our outcomes might be? How can we get community defined and community owned outcomes, where community includes children?”

Planning processes often don't include children's voices because

- Processes used are irrelevant to them
- Assumptions about developmental capacities of children to participate and represent themselves
- Fear of implications when they do represent themselves

Alice introduced us to the term and concept “the parallel universe of serviceland”

In order to get baseline data that would inform the development of a community plan they decided to use photovoice.

Photovoice is a PAR method involving people photographing issues and themes to form the basis of program, service and policy development. So it is a planning, development and evaluation method.

Alice talked about progressive photography which is concerned with new or alternative representations of reality. Mainstream photography often concerned with what is marginalized from the photographer's experience.

Process

- **Select theme**
In this case the theme was “a good start to life for children in Woodberry” and this was broken into 4 subthemes
What I like about growing up in Woodberry
What I don’t like about growing up in Woodberry
My main wish for the future
My main worry about the future
- **Invite people to participate**
- **Take photos**
- **Get together and tell stories about the photos**

Method

- Parental consent
- Compulsory workshop for children to learn about camera use and some ways to approach the questions. Visual problem solving. Steps to taking a good photo. Photography ethics including permission to take a photo
- Had the cameras for one week
- Photos developed and had a focus group. Children provide the narrative for their photo
- Exhibition
Very important to do this well and make it a big deal.
Photos converted to black and white and some digitally enhanced
Response – people amazed by depth of children’s visual capabilities

Issues

- There is a language of visual representation that we are all familiar with – family album, commercial, documentary. But photovoice is a different language and if this is the case then how should it be codified?
- Photovoice is less concerned with themes and more concerned with personal experiences and meanings
- However they still took a framework of identified developmental assets (see www.search-institute.org) and codified photos

Open Space Discussion

We broke into groups using an open space discussion technique which worked very well

Guidelines are

- A call to workshop participants to suggest subjects/questions/topics/issues they are interested in
- Person nominating a subject becomes the convenor of the group
- Those not convening select a subject they are interested in to go and chat about
- Whoever comes to the group are the right people
- Whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened
- When it starts is the right time
- When it’s over it’s over
- Law of 2 feet – when you are ready to move on you can go to another group, including the convenor

Comment

- I would remind people they can move on after a time as it felt impolite to do so.

Reflection about Evaluation

Seems that it is important that evaluation information has multiple uses. If just trying to gather information for research or evaluation then it can be very hard because there are limited resources and time, and perhaps motivation on the part of participants and program people. But if this information has multiple uses then people are more interested to get involved

References

We bought a whole set of documents about the strengths based approach and these are now in the library. All very readable

One of them is

Dewar, T (1997) **A Guide to Evaluating Asset-Based Community Development: Lessons, Challenges, and Opportunities**, Kretzmann and McKnight, ACTA Publications, Chicago

Summary of the 12 Principles for Evaluating Community Programs

1. Involve participants directly in the process.
2. Know your audience.
Focus on questions.
Make sure the evaluation is going to tell you some things you didn't already know.
Think about the political dimensions of the work. Who is this really for?
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4. Use stories (in preference over "analysis.")
5. Document some results as quickly as possible and share them.
6. Develop some strong baseline evidence. Try to learn about how things change over time. That's often where the real stories are.
7. Be descriptive.
8. Be graphic.
9. Be open about shortcomings - both in the work itself and in how the evaluation is conducted.
10. Share and discuss findings as the evaluation progresses - don't wait until the end.
11. Make sure the evaluation is do-able, and fun.
12. Overall, try to underpromise and overdeliver.