Title: Transformative evaluation: organisational learning through participative practice

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Transformative Evaluation: Organisational Learning through Participative Practice

Introduction

This research paper presents an innovative evaluation methodology which was developed as part of a doctoral research study in a voluntary sector youth organisation in England. Based on the Most Significant Change technique (Davies 1996) the methodology focuses on learning and change, on improving rather than proving (Springett 2001). Evidence is presented to show that the methodology enabled all stakeholders, young people, youth workers, managers and trustees to engage with the process of evaluation in a meaningful way. Embedding evaluation in the organisation promoted organisational learning adding strength to the claim that 'those who do evaluation learn from evaluation' (Forss *et al.* 2002:33). Drawing on analysis of the youth workers' experiences, it is argued that the illuminative and transformative nature of the participatory evaluation process enabled the learning and development functions of evaluation to be realised. Further, it is shown that this form of evaluation not only supports the collection of evidence to demonstrate impact, but that the process itself has the potential to enhance practice by improving outcomes 'in the moment' and promote organisational learning by supporting Senge's five disciplines.

Rationale

Two key areas of concern directed the empirical research that informs this paper; firstly the shift of focus towards seeing evaluation in terms of a narrowly-formed conception of accountability. This is a concern because accountability metrics are not only incongruent with social justice work but more importantly, they are inadequate for capturing the complexity and demonstrating the value of this work (see Ball 2003). The second concern is that evaluation in this context is reduced to upward compliance; the professional is no longer responsible for defining good practice or determining the outcomes of their work, and the learning and development functions of evaluation are therefore lost.

The youth workers expressed feelings of alienation from the evaluation process as a result of the incompatibility of the scientific approach to the context of their practice (Everitt and Hardiker 1996). They also presented a sense of exclusion from the process of evaluation (Issitt and Spence (2005), Beresford and Branfield (2006)). This view is reflected in the research report *Developing Monitoring and Evaluation in the Third Sector* (Ellis 2008) which confirms that practitioners predominantly believe that evaluation is done mainly for the benefit of funders and regulators. The challenge is to ensure practitioners engage with the process of evaluation as 'researchers of their own practice' not as 'data collectors' as the latter severely limits the learning potential of evaluation. To address this challenge a new approach was necessary, one which could change both the process and the outcome of evaluation and which would enhance the learning potential for all involved.

The Research Project

The opportunity to develop a participatory evaluation methodology came as part of a larger scale commissioned evaluation of a voluntary sector youth work organisation. A defining characteristic of participatory evaluation is the effort developed by a group of people working together in an interactive manner with the focus on the process, rather than on results (Suárez-Herrera *et al.* 2009). The commitment to local control and capacity building means that participatory evaluation has the potential to enable practitioners to generate their own learning and support reflective practice (Hall and Hall 2004). As Springett (2001:148) argues 'If evaluation is viewed as critical praxis, then learning and change become the focus. The emphasis is no longer on proving but on improving.' Suárez-Herrera *et al.* (2009) highlight the learning potential of participative evaluation approaches, asserting that the interaction and communication between stakeholders engaged in evaluative networks constitute a superior way of learning. Practitioners and participants learn more about themselves and the context and situation in which they find themselves. Taking a participatory approach sets out to acknowledge and elevate the perspectives, voices, and decisions of the least powerful and the most affected stakeholders (Jackson and Kassam 1998). For practitioners, it can offer resistance to evaluation as 'technology

of power' and for participants, it can offer resistance to deficit-based normative approaches to service provision.

Evaluation conducted in this way has the potential to be transformative as it places central importance on the lives and experience of the 'least powerful' and illuminates and questions asymmetric power relations. A key feature of the transformative paradigm is the conscious inclusion of a broad range of people who are generally excluded from mainstream (Mertens 2009). The evaluation methodology presented here set out to include those who are generally excluded from evaluation processes, namely young people and practitioners. Brookfield (2000: 139) asserts that the word 'transformative' is often misused and believes 'an act of learning can be called transformative only if it involves a fundamental questioning and reordering of how one thinks or acts.'

The transformative approach requires a move from a deficit-based to a resilience-based perspective, this appreciative approach is central to this evaluation methodology. Appreciative inquiry is a strength-based approach that takes a positive stance in an effort to counterbalance the deficit discourse of problem-solving (Cooperrider and Srivastva 1987, Zandee and Cooperrider 2008). As a form of constructionism in action, appreciative inquiry proposes that if we ask questions about problems we create a reality of problems, if we ask questions about 'what works' we create a reality of potential (Reed 2007).

Senge (2006:3) is clear that collaboration is a key feature of organisational learning, asserting that in a Learning Organisation collective aspiration is 'set free' and 'people are continually learning how to learn together'. The evaluation methodology nurtures expansive patterns of thinking that promote generative learning, 'learning that enhances our capacity to create' (Senge 2006:14). The extent to which the methodology supports Senge's five disciplines: mental models; personal mastery; system thinking; shared vision; and team work is explored later. The methodology is aligned with the basic principles of Learning Organisations (Mullins 2007) in various ways, for example, the 'bottom–up' approach recognises that those engaged in the delivery of services often know more about the activities than their managers.

Importantly, it provides a process to move knowledge from one part of the organisation to another, up, down and across.

Developing the evaluation methodology

The evaluation methodology is based on the 'Most Significant Change' (MSC) technique (Davies 1996), chosen for its participatory and dialogical nature. It is an on-going practice, rather than a 'one-off' evaluative process and hence it is shaped by those who use it as they learn from its use. Essentially the MSC technique involves the generation of a number of participants' Significant Change stories during a given time period and the systematic collective analysis of the stories (see Davies and Dart 2005 for detailed information about the technique). Establishing a dialogue between the 'evaluators' (in this case the youth workers) and the community members (the young people) is a critical element of a transformative (Whitmore *et al.* 2013).

The technique was developed in response to the inadequacies of conventional evaluation processes in capturing programme impacts that are difficult to quantify, and hence it seemed entirely appropriate for use in a youth work context. Its focus on learning rather than accountability (Willetts and Crawford 2007) meant that it offered real potential to re-engage youth workers in the process of evaluation. The technique had not been used in a youth work context in the UK before and thus required adaptations to ensure its suitability for a youth work context. A central aim, as stated earlier, was to develop the level of participation of the youth workers in evaluation and this was addressed by adaptations to the story generation stage. The MSC technique, as with other participative evaluation methods, is aligned with the interpretivist paradigm, it does not seek to identify 'right ways' of doing things, it does not seek to 'generalise and transport' rather it seeks to develop insight and understanding and to develop professional practice based on this increased understanding. In other words this evaluation belonged to those involved, not just the funders.

Implementing the evaluation methodology

A four stage methodology was designed for use in this project: 1) preparation, 2) story generation, 3) analysis, selection and feedback, 4) meta-evaluation.

Stage 1 was concerned with the preparation and training of the youth workers.

Stage 2 involved youth workers generating significant change stories. A Significant Change story is the response to the open question:

> Looking back over the last month or so, what do you think was the most significant change that occurred for you as a result of coming here?

The youth workers engaged young people in conversation, asked this question and recorded the responses in a variety of ways. The young person was encouraged to explain why the change was significant to them. This promoted reflective dialogue between the young person and the youth worker. Three cycles of generating and selecting Significant Change stories were implemented over a ten month period. Each cycle involved the youth workers generating up to four stories from the young people attending their projects.

Stage 3 involved the analysis, selection and feedback of the collected Significant Change stories. This stage began with the sorting of stories into groups or domains. Sorting the stories and assigning domain names led to in-depth analysis and reflection and was a challenging part of the process for the youth workers. The MSC technique was adapted at this point to include an input from the youth worker who had generated the story, allowing them to add context and professional commentary to the young person's story. Engagement in reflective dialogue with peers about their understanding of the young person's story and their intervention supported the youth worker in the co-construction of the story and promoted two of Senge's disciplines: mental models and personal mastery. Reaching consensus on the Most Significant Change story for each domain was the final stage of analysis for the youth workers and promoted two further disciplines: shared vision and team work. The reason for selection was added to the original stories and the stories were then passed to the Managers and Trustees Group. The task of this group was to discuss, review and select the MSC story for that cycle. The cycle was completed by the return of the

MSC story to the youth workers group together with the Managers and Trustees' reason that the selected that particular story.

Stage 4, the concluding stage, involved a process of meta-evaluation. At the end of each cycle the group reviewed their experience of using the evaluation methodology with the purpose of developing skills and understanding to inform the next cycle.

The evaluation methodology produced a collection of Significant Change stories which using the words of the young people and youth workers involved provided rich descriptions of the impact of interventions on the lives of young people. This was the product, useful for demonstrating the value and effectiveness of the organisation's work to its funders complementing the quantitative analysis of its outputs. This however is only part of the story, the process of the evaluation provided learning opportunities far beyond this; learning for the young people, for the youth workers and for the managers and trustees.

Findings

This interpretive study focused on the experiences of eight youth workers as they engaged in an action research project in which they implemented the new participatory evaluation methodology. Data were gathered via individual semi-structured interviews before and after the implementation and an inductive thematic analysis was used to identify emergent themes. A number of themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the interview data; the focus in this paper is the way in which the evaluation methodology promoted learning and prompted change and thus was transformative. Evidence of the transformative nature is presented in two sections; youth workers' practice and learning for managers and trustees.

Youth Workers' Practice: Illuminating the gap

'Conversation is central to our practice as informal educators' (Jeffs and Smith 2005:27); 'Youth and community work is about dialogue, about conversation (Batsleer 2008:5). The evaluation methodology required the youth workers to

engage in conversation with young people to generate Significant Change stories. Surprisingly, many of the youth workers commented on how much they had enjoyed the experience of 'sitting down and talking' with young people. This was unexpected, particularly as one could assume that 'sitting down and talking' with young people was an everyday activity for youth workers given that conversation is central to youth work practice. This, however did not seem to be the case, as Beth's comment illustrates '*you knew you had to do it* [generate stories] *and I think if we didn't have to do it, it [the conversation] wouldn't have happened*'

An unanticipated outcome was the illumination of the youth workers' challenge of finding time to engage in meaningful conversation with young people. It was assumed that the story generation stage would take place during normal youth work sessions and therefore require no additional time. However many of the youth workers commented on the difficulty of finding time within the sessions to generate stories without interruption. This raises important questions for the youth workers, the organisation and the wider youth work field and provides a good example of how the evaluation promotes organisational learning in relation to systems thinking. If meaningful conversation is central to youth work, and yet workers are reluctant to engage in this activity because of the likelihood of interruption, what has happened to youth work? What is going on in sessions? The illumination of incongruence between espoused theory and theory-in-use (Argyris and Schön 1974) was a valuable insight for the youth workers and the organisation, demonstrating the learning potential of using a participatory and process-focused evaluation methodology.

This realisation prompted change as illustrated by the following extract;

> *one thing* [I will take away from using the methodology] *that's making sure we give the opportunity to young people and that we take the opportunity ourselves to be able to sit down and talk to them about either why they come or how they feel they progress, how they feel they're getting on (...) it's definitely made me want to take more time, rather than just ask about their day, to say "how do you think you're getting on here?" Or "is there anything you want to do? Do you feel you've changed?" You know to find out more about them since they started the project* (Emma)

Youth Workers' Practice: Improving practice 'in the moment'

The story generation stage of the evaluation methodology enhanced the existing relationships between the youth workers and the young people and thus improved practice 'in the moment' . George found that the process of generating the stories had enabled him to develop deeper relationships with young people:

> *because you're asking them questions which are kind of difficult rather than just offhand comments about things, you create a bit more of a relationship, you develop a relationship with people a bit more*

and Helen illustrates:

> *the stories they told were meaningful to both of us, from the experiences that had gone on in the Centre so, there was a bit of bonding there whilst we discussed the stories*

Both of these extracts indicate that the youth workers were able to recognise congruence between their youth work practice and their evaluation practice. Generating Significant Change stories involved the youth workers facilitating the young people to reflect on the outcome of their involvement with the project, illuminating their learning journeys. Importantly, this learning is possibly extended or solidified as a result of that illumination. Clair articulated this well when she said '*the process of generating the story is a journey in itself.*

In summary the evaluation methodology enhanced the youth workers' practice 'in the moment'. It enabled them to spend quality time with young people, in meaningful conversations, that developed and deepened their relationships with young people. It required them to prioritise time to engage in 1 to 1 reflective conversations with young people and with each other and it validated the activity of 'sitting down and talking'. Further, it provided a frame to support the development of meaningful conversations; a template that aided a shift from everyday surface conversation to deeper and more meaningful educative conversations that constitute skilful youth work and a process that aided collective reflective peer discussions. The methodology appears to promote the process of 'really talking' (Belenky 1986 cited in Mezirow 2000: 14) and 'generous listening' (Reed 2007:ix) where emphasis is placed on active listening, reciprocity and co-operation where

active dialogue is used to better understand the meaning and value of an experience and to use that understanding to vision new possibilities for action.

Learning for Managers and Trustees

The Managers and Trustees Group (MTG) received the co-created stories from the youth workers groups and were tasked with reading the stories and through discussion and debate to identify what they considered the Most Significant Change story for the period. Their decision, and their reasoning was added to the chosen story and this was fed back to the youth workers. Whilst this stage was not the focus of the research informing this paper, it was particularly interesting to note the difference in response over time from the MTG in terms of their feedback. The response at the end of the first period was very brief; and as follows:

> This story was chosen by the Managers and Trustees group because it demonstrates outcomes related to the main aim of the YSDF funding which was to reduce anti-social behaviour. Importantly, it also demonstrates the benefits of working with other organisations to improve outcomes for young people.

When this feedback was received by the Youth Workers group the initial reaction was one of disappointment and perhaps resignation. The general consensus was that because the MTG's focus on meeting externally set targets was so fixed they not really engaged with the process and that 'nothing was going to change'. This negative feeling was countered to some extent by reminding the youth workers group that this was the end of the first cycle and that perhaps time was needed to enable change.

The responses to the second and third cycles were much more considered and demonstrated a greater understanding and appreciation of the youth worker's interventions;

> Second Cycle
>
> This story was chosen by the Managers and Trustees group because it demonstrates the importance of relationship building with young people. The story showed the amount of work that has been conducted with the young woman over a period of time and the fact that she was able to express what she had gained from it and the longevity of

9

connection. The story highlighted the range of activities that young people can get engaged in throughout their involvement with a youth project but that the most important thing is the emphasis on the development of trusting relationships. It highlighted how involvement in the youth group had appeared to be a consistent and positive influence on the young person during a challenging period of her life.

Third Cycle

This story was chosen by the Managers and Trustees group because it demonstrates how to channel a young person's aggression / challenging behaviour into something positive by giving him responsibility and status of a different kind. This example shows how the workers never gave up and eventually enlisted the help of the employer to persuade [young person] to take on a challenge and no doubt support him with it. Overall this story demonstrates the workers' persistence, eventually they were able to find a way of helping him, the club and the community showing that positive outcomes are achievable to the benefit of the youth and the community and the business community.

It is not possible to ascertain what changed for the MTG over the period of time as this was not investigated during the research. It may have been that the youth workers skill in co-creating the stores developed over time, it may have been that the act of receiving positive change stories impacted on the way in which the MTG responded to those stories, perhaps their discussion, as with the youth workers group, became more in-depth and more reflective in relation to what constitutes effective interventions. This is clearly an area for further research. What is evident is the change in the youth workers' relationship with, and their understanding of the MTG, promoting systems thinking (Senge 2006) as demonstrated by this youth worker's comment:

> the trustees spend a lot of the time with figures, they look at what we've done, this many of this, and this many of that – they don't actually get any personalised feeling about it, or actually how it has helped, or any emotion or anything like that, it [the stories] actually brings the work we're doing to life (...) so it gives them an insight into what we do (Dave)

Transformative Evaluation: Collaboration and Empowerment

It is argued that whilst the evaluation methodology started out with a descriptive intent, it evolved into a transformative agenda (Mertens 2009). The evaluation methodology was transformative in that it involved a process of re-framing evaluation that enabled a more democratic practice (Mertens 2009). The process of co-creation changes the youth workers' role shifting from the more usual position of 'objective' collector of data to that of co-researcher developing their personal mastery (Senge 2006). Using a collective approach to evaluation extends the process of evaluation by drawing in and on the knowledge of peers developing team work and systems thinking. The evaluation methodology supported the development of a shared understanding of practice which in turn may support the development of a shared professional identity (Healy 2009), and as Allards *et al.* (2007) state, collective reflection intensifies professional development. The methodology 'transformed' the practice of youth work, by enabling a return to the notion of relationship and meaningful conversation as central to youth work practice. Finally, it transformed practice by enabling a re-framing of reflective practice from an individual pursuit of 'problem-identification and rectification' to one of critical collective dialogue based on narratives of resilience (Reed 2007).

The collaborative nature of the methodology was appreciated, for example Ali placed high value on peer space and, interestingly, she likened the methodology to a supervision-type process rather than to an evaluation process, perhaps suggesting its reflective, educative and supportive nature. The evaluation methodology enabled meaningful reflective conversations which can sustain and nourish practitioners (Ghaye and Ghaye, 1998). There was a depth of the discussion during this story selection stage of the methodology which surprised some as shown in Fiona's comment:

> *it was nice as a staff group to find out what we all thought about the different stories that were collected, (...) and a lot more came out of it than I probably anticipated – I thought we'd all just look at them and go 'yeah, that one, that one, that one – done' but there was so much to it and it was far more complex*

Emma elaborated on this in-depth discussion as follows:

> *discussing why a story should go through and why it shouldn't and finding out what everyone thought, either individually or as a group as to what is distance*

travelled and what is an achievement for a young person and working out who has come the furthest and who has achieved the most

These are extremely complex issues. The comments above illustrate a key characteristic of critical reflective learning in that they evidence the move away from the immediate to take a broader view of practice. This shift can be seen to represent a move from adaptive learning to generative learning (Senge 2006), from single loop to double loop learning (Argyris and Schon 1978) as the focus of dialogue moves from problem-solving towards active collective reflection on the educational goals, values and issues of equity and social justice (Ng and Tan 2009).

The evaluation methodology drew on the trusting relationships between the youth workers and the young people, and between the youth workers themselves to enable questioning discussions, the open sharing of information and the achievement of consensual and mutual understanding. It is important to note that the youth workers involved in the research project were already a well-established group and it may have been the strength of their trusting relationships rather the actual process itself that enabled this methodology to be transformative, this requires further research. McCormack and Kennelly (2011) talk about the three factors; connection, engagement and safety that held their groups together as conversation communities. They argued that successful conversation communities needed to be built deliberately and systematically. The evaluation methodology developed for this research can provide such a systematic framework but further research is necessary to confirm this.

The evaluation methodology provides a process in which practitioners have the space to 'make sense of what is going on' through dialogue and critical reflection and this according to Dahlberg *et al.* (2007) increases agency. All the youth workers, in response to a question relating to the benefits of implementing the evaluation methodology, commented on how it had encouraged and supported them and confirmed their sense of professional self. Woven through the youth workers' accounts are indications of emerging confidence and perhaps a belief in the possibility of a level of professional autonomy, Dave expressed his feelings thus;

the fact is you've got something there that you can actually look at and say 'wow, we've made a difference' so it actually reinforces your work, makes the

> *workforce a lot happier, we're doing the right thing and it gives us confidence in what we're doing'*

Ali demonstrated her sense of increased agency when she said '*it will give us ammunition to justify the work that we do, when you're told from above that you can't do something anymore, you'll be able to turn around and say it might not be hitting those targets but this is what its generating.'* An increased sense of self–belief can help support professionals to use their agency (Osgood 2006).

It is argued that this sense of improved well-being and agency is a consequence of the appreciative underpinning of the methodology. The evaluation supported the creation, discussion and reflection of positive stories, its 'appreciative gaze' (Ghaye *et al.* 2008, Reed 2007)) turned the focus to the things that worked and countered the effects of performativity (Ball 2008). Rather than focussing on the problems and the associated feeling of inadequacy, the youth workers were able to see the positive nature of their work and feel good about that, leading to an enhanced sense of professional self.   At times of such radical change, and the accompanying challenges to professionalism and professional identity, a process that enables practitioners to feel positive about themselves and about the work they do must have advantages for young people, the practitioners themselves and the organisation overall.

Limitations of the evaluation methodology

There were, of course, limitations to using the evaluation methodology, firstly the MSC technique on which it is based, was developed in the field of overseas development and with adults, and both of these raise questions about transferability to a youth work project in the UK. Secondly, the size of the organisation was an issue as most other MSC projects were conducted in much bigger organisations. As the implementation progressed, a number of minor adjustments were made, particularly in terms of the size of the organisation, and therefore the range of stakeholders involved.

The generation of stories was a challenging stage for some of the youth workers in regards to concerns about validity of the process, of leading or manipulating young people and issues of sampling. These issues were discussed throughout as the youth workers developed their skills, understanding and approach. The notion of 'generating' rather than 'collecting' stories was introduced to make transparent the 'researcher involvement' in interpretivist research. Interestingly, what also came out of the discussions regarding the role of the youth worker in story generation was the realisation that in fact these conversations could easily be seen as part of the youth worker's role, to support young people to reflect on their experiences and learn from them.

The use of purposive sampling was questioned in terms of reliability, and this created a level of unease for some of the practitioners. Clarification was given that whereas purposive sampling can be seen as a weakness in the positivist paradigm, it is seen as strength in interpretivist study. It is entirely appropriate to select 'excellent informants' (Spradley 1979) as these people are the ones who can tell us the most about the question we seek to understand. Selecting young people based on prior knowledge that they have experienced a change as a result of being involved with the organisation was purposefully 'biased', not to make the organisation look good but in order to learn from those cases of good practice (Patton 2002).

Finally, much of the criticism of participatory evaluation raises challenges about validity, reliability and generalisability, which are clearly located in positivist-inspired aspirations. Participatory evaluation is informed by the interpretive paradigm and does not draw on these positivist criterions, rather it uses terms such as credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Guba and Lincoln 2005). It is important here to state that this evaluation methodology was used alongside other methodologies; it was seen as complementary and not as a replacement

Conclusions

The transformative evaluation methodology presented in this paper is innovative and has the potential to improve the assessment of the impact of social justice interventions. The added value of using a transformative evaluation paradigm can be

seen in its ability to re-engage practitioners in what is seen as a fundamental aspect of professionalism - the assessment of the impact of their work. The appreciative nature of the methodology balances the current deficit discourse and provides a complementary approach to evaluation that focuses on learning and practice improvement. In addition, it provides a framework to encourage organisational learning through collective reflective spaces and the enhancement of dialogue up, down and across the organisation. The evaluation methodology developed through this research study did not simply provide a new approach to evaluation, it provided a process that enabled the youth workers to evaluate their practice and in doing so, the process itself brought about the development of that practice and of those practice outcomes as well. Put simply, by transforming the conception of evaluation, the act of evaluating was transformed, and the impact of that transformation was seen 'in the moment' in relation to changing practice.

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