METHODOLOGICAL AND CONCEPTUAL CHALLENGES IN STUDYING EVALUATION PROCESS USE

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Abstract: This article discusses methodological and conceptual challenges in empirically studying process use. The main difficulty lies in disentangling cause (here the evaluation process) and effects (here indicators of process use). The evaluation researcher not only needs to take into account all relevant factors regarding the evaluator, the participants, the evaluation context, and the evaluation approach and implementation, but also needs to base the research on a valid operationalization of process use. The article was inspired by the author's experiences in conducting an exploratory study of process use in the context of two expert-facilitated self-evaluation projects involving five program staff. Before larger-scale studies can establish more generalizable knowledge on process use, evaluation researchers should engage in high-quality, real-time, in-depth qualitative studies to better understand the complex interactions at play and to help build a solid operationalization of this relevant construct.

Résumé :   Cet article aborde les défis conceptuels et méthodologiques qui se posent lors de l'étude empirique de l'utilisation des processus. La principale difficulté consiste à démêler la cause, le processus d'évaluation, et les effets qui en découlent, les indicateurs de l'utilisation du processus. Le chercheur en évaluation doit non seulement tenir compte de tous les facteurs pertinents concernant l'évaluateur, les participants, et le contexte, l'approche, et la mise en œuvre de l'évaluation, mais il doit également établir la recherche en fonction d'une opérationalisation valide de l'utilisation des processus. L'article s'inspire des expériences de l'auteur qui a mené une étude exploratoire sur l'utilisation des processus dans le cadre de deux projets d'auto-évaluation animés par des experts et comprenant cinq employés du programme. Avant que des études à plus vaste échelle ne puissent établir des connaissances plus généralisables concernant l'utilisation des processus, les chercheurs en évaluation devraient entreprendre des études

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qualitatives approfondies, en temps réel, et de grande qualité visant à mieux comprendre les interactions complexes en jeu et contribuant à mettre sur pied une opérationalisation rigoureuse de ce concept pertinent.

■■■■■ Empirical research on evaluation use has a relatively long history, with dozens of studies that contribute to our understanding of the use (or non-use) of evaluation findings (see Hofstetter & Alkin, 2003; Shulha & Cousins, 1997). More recently, evaluation scholars have explicitly started to address the evaluation process as potentially generating use. The term "process use" was coined by Patton (1997) and has since received increasing attention. Evaluators practicing collaborative evaluation approaches had long recognized the added benefits for users or stakeholders of participation in the evaluation process. They described effects such as increased ownership of the evaluation findings, increased evaluative thinking and skills, and also program-related outcomes such as improved clarity on program logic and increased commitment to program goals. Despite this apparent practical importance of process use, empirical research related to process use is still scarce (see Amo & Cousins, 2006). The goal of this article is to discuss the methodological and conceptual challenges related to the study of process use and to guide future research by describing an exploratory study of process use that was conducted in the context of two expert-facilitated self-evaluation projects.

I first offer a summary of the evaluation literature related to process use, then describe the exploratory study on process use and its main findings, and finally share reflections regarding the methodological and conceptual challenges evaluation researchers face when studying process use.

PROCESS USE IN THE EVALUATION LITERATURE

Although we find earlier sources referring to concepts similar to evaluation process use, Patton (1997) first formally introduced the definition of *process use,* as apart from findings use, in the field of program evaluation. He suggested that this type of use is a result of the learning that occurs due to the involvement in the evaluation process, as opposed to the learning that occurs due to the reception of the evaluation findings. The learning should manifest itself in changes in thinking, attitudes, and behaviour at individual, team, and organizational levels (also see Cousins, 2003; Forss, Rebien, & Carlsson, 2002). For example, involvement in an evaluation process can build individual capacity to systematically inquire about one's work

and to gain greater understanding about the objects of evaluation through awareness of underlying assumptions and implicit theories (Patton, 1998).

In essence, the first part of Patton's (1997) definition of process use is similar to the definition of conceptual use of evaluation findings (see Rich, 1977). Both stress the learning aspect; only the source that brings about the learning differs: evaluation process versus evaluation findings. The second part of Patton's process use definition—the manifestation of the learning in terms of cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioural changes—includes instrumental aspects: learning from the evaluation process may not only result in cognitive and affective (conceptual) changes, but also in changes in actual behaviour or in decision-making that takes place throughout the evaluation process. Further thinking about process use has thus differentiated instrumental, conceptual, and symbolic process use (see Alkin & Taut, 2003). That is, the evaluation process might lead to conceptual changes in thinking and understanding about the program, the organization, and one's own role. Or the evaluation process might spark a refocusing of project objectives or a reorganization of program activities, involving concrete decisions about program changes, referred to as instrumental process use. Finally, symbolic process use may occur when evaluation participants engage in the process mainly for symbolic purposes: to be able to show to others that they are doing it.

Forss, Cracknell, and Samset (1994) offer an explanation of what happens when individuals or organizations *learn* from evaluation: Individual and organizational knowledge structures are changed by incorporating new information into existing schemes, so that people's way of thinking about issues changes. The more specific and linked to everyday tasks the input from evaluation is, the higher is its impact in terms of individual learning. The psychological literature explains that new information is processed and elaborated on extensively, and thus more likely to be assimilated, if the input or feedback is constructed experientially and directly, instead of indirectly (see Petty & Cacioppo, 1996).

In line with these implications based on psychological research, Patton (1997) stresses that process use (as well as findings use) requires a participatory, collaborative evaluation process. Similarly, Cousins (2003) points out that process use is an additional consequence of stakeholder participation in evaluation activities. Throughout the literature, participation, involvement, and collaboration in an evalua-

tion are considered the main mechanisms to ensure learning from the evaluation process specifically (for a summary of relevant research see Cousins, 2003; as well as Cousins, Goh, Clark, & Lee, 2004).

Greene (1988) conducted an influential qualitative study on participation and use. Although her findings focus on participatory evaluation processes, they are of interest for research on process use generally and our example of self-evaluation process use in particular. Based on her findings, she distinguishes three types of possible changes resulting from the participatory evaluation process: cognitive, affective, and political. The cognitive dimension (that is, processing and assimilation of evaluative information) is served by active discussions and an actual decision-making role for the stakeholders. Affective effects include the individuals' feelings of worth and value, as created through the interviews as well as actual decision-making power. Finally, the political dimension is based on giving voice to the less powerful actors. Greene's research showed that stakeholders mainly benefit in two ways from a participatory process. First, they learned more about their work, the program, and the organization. Second, they learned more about evaluation and developed more favourable attitudes toward evaluation. These learning benefits could be regarded as examples of process use.

On a team or organizational level, a participatory evaluation process can contribute to the development of shared values and understanding, facilitate communication among stakeholders, and (infrequently) support structural organizational changes (see Robinson, 1998; Cousins, 1996). For example, Preskill and Torres (1999) have focused their evaluative inquiry approach on enhancing the use of evaluation processes for organizational learning and change. Recently, Balthasar (2006) undertook an empirical study identifying factors that increase the likelihood of different types of use in institutional settings; he identified the degree of proximity between evaluator and user as one necessary condition for process use to occur. Earlier, Torres (1994) had discussed the impact of the evaluation process on the *internalization* of evaluative thinking and practice in organizations.

As shown above, process use and findings use are highly interrelated. For example, Greene (1988) discussed conceptual use (of both process and findings) as a prerequisite to instrumental findings use. Other participatory evaluation theorists would agree that without process use the likelihood for using the evaluation findings is smaller. However, the empirical evidence for such claims is sparse, not least because the conceptualization of process use as a distinct outcome of

evaluation is still fairly undeveloped. Research studies aiming specifically at studying process use, and establishing the link between process use and findings use, are yet to be amassed.

One of the few published empirical studies on process use was conducted by Preskill, Zuckerman, and Matthews (2003). They identified factors influencing the likelihood that process use occurs: (a) facilitation of the evaluation process, (b) management support, (c) group characteristics, (d) characteristics of the communication process, and (e) organization characteristics. In addition, they stress the importance of the intentionality of process use, a point that is also underlined by Forss et al. (2002). These researchers summarize the following manifestations of process use in their summary of what process use can look like: (a) learning to learn, (b) developing networks, (c) creating shared understanding, (d) strengthening the project, and (e) boosting morale.

Some evaluation scholars have incorporated the notion of process use in their conceptualization of *evaluation influence*. Kirkhart (2000) was one of the first to assert that the evaluation use concept was too limiting in its scope and would not adequately account for the multiplicity of ways in which both the evaluation findings and the evaluation process could have an impact, or induce changes. Kirkhart posits that evaluators should not only claim for themselves the intended, direct, measurable uses of the evaluation, but also the unintended, indirect, intangible influences that arise from an evaluation. Henry and Mark (2003) further developed these ideas by describing a number of change mechanisms that are assumed to cause evaluation influence at individual, interpersonal, and collective levels. Their call to study pathways of influence similar to a program theory of evaluation focuses primarily on evaluation findings, but they also mention the evaluation process as a source of influence. Whether we talk about use or influence, both concepts give a prominent place to the evaluation process as a source of change at individual, group, and organizational levels.

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF PROCESS USE

I conducted an exploratory study of process use while working in the evaluation unit of a large international development organization. This organization's use of evaluation had often been legitimative, driven by internal or external accountability demands. Most evaluations were conducted *ex-post* by external consultants, usually with

minimal involvement of program stakeholders. An organizational assessment showed that, overall, the organization did not provide the necessary structural or cultural prerequisites to learn from evaluation, be it from the process or from the findings (see Taut, 2007).

My exploratory study happened in the context of a specific evaluation approach: self-evaluation. The use of the term *self-evaluation* depends on the respective national and substantive context (see, for example, Airasian, Gullickson, Hahn, & Farland, 1995; Deutsche Gesellschaft für Evaluation, 2004; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development/Development Assistance Committee, 2003). Generally, self-evaluation must be differentiated from internal evaluation, self-assessment or self-reflection, and participatory evaluation. Self-evaluation as understood in this study is a formative, reflective, evidence-based process where program staff who are in charge of a program also conduct the evaluation of this program. However, in this study they received my support as an expert evaluator and facilitator of the evaluation process. Clearly, there are many similarities between the practice of expert-facilitated self-evaluation and practical participatory evaluation, which also aims at building the primary stakeholders' appreciation and necessary skills to eventually conduct evaluations on their own as an integrated ongoing practice (see Cousins & Earl, 1995).

Weaver and Cousins (2003) provide a framework that helps to describe and differentiate collaborative evaluation approaches. Based on their five dimensions, the expert-facilitated self-evaluation approach used in this exploratory study can be characterized as follows: (a) control of technical decision-making rested to an equal extent with the evaluator-facilitator and the program staff; (b) there was limited diversity of stakeholders selected for participation (only program staff participated); (c) therefore, power relations among participating stakeholders were fairly neutral; (d) during evaluation implementation emphasis was placed on its feasibility; and (e) participants engaged directly in all technical evaluation tasks (referred to as "deep" participation).

 For the study I worked with two projects from the organization's largest program sector. The first project involved a multinational team of four program staff who wanted to gather formative feedback on a key policy document they were writing related to the promotion of inclusive education. During the self-evaluation we developed e-mail questionnaires and cover letters to different groups of respondents, held structured discussions about the revisions of the document, de-

signed analysis tables to systematically process the written feedback from the e-mail questionnaires, and thus guided the final revision process of the document. The second project I worked with involved a professional who was responsible for a newsletter that was sent to a network of schools all over the world. She was interested in collecting evidence regarding the comprehensibility, relevance, and use of this newsletter. With her we developed a questionnaire to be added to the next issue of the newsletter, including pre-testing of the instrument, and we prepared the statistical analysis of the data.

The professionals from both projects had previously participated in a one-day workshop on self-evaluation that had taken place about one month prior to the start of the self-evaluation projects. The workshop had introduced them to the basics of self-evaluation. During the workshop all workshop participants had prepared self-evaluation plans that they were encouraged to implement after the workshop with my support and facilitation. Only those five participants actually followed through and engaged in a self-evaluation with my ongoing support.

I set out to study the two self-evaluation projects in terms of the extent to which they generated process use by the participants. The evaluation literature does not offer a concise operationalization of process use. The few evaluation scholars who have conducted research on process use have generally based their operationalizations on Patton's (1997) definition (see Amo & Cousins, 2006). Inspired by previous writings on the topic, I defined the following changes as indicators of process use: In terms of cognitive aspects, I expected to see an increase in relevant knowledge about (self-)evaluation, and eventually the incorporation of evaluative thinking into everyday professional practice. In terms of affective aspects, I expected to see positive change in (or stable positive) attitudes toward (self-)evaluation, as well as a strong sense of ownership of the self-evaluation process (i.e., participants perceive that they have a large degree of control over the process), and finally, increased motivation to engage in self-evaluation (i.e., indications that for the participants the expected benefits far outweigh the expected costs). Last but not least, in terms of behavioural aspects, I expected to see improved skills to engage in self-evaluation, including the skills needed to integrate this approach into everyday work processes. In essence, I wanted to know whether process use as operationalized above could be observed as part of the expert-facilitated self-evaluation processes, and I was also interested in better understanding the main process characteristics that fostered and hindered such process use to occur.

So I played the double role of self-evaluation facilitator and evaluation researcher studying process use. As the facilitator, I had bi-weekly meetings and more frequent e-mail and telephone contact with the professionals in charge of the self-evaluations. I applied group facilitation, modelling, and immediate feedback techniques while striving to maintain the professionals' ownership of the process. As the evaluation researcher, I studied the two self-evaluation projects in "real-time." That is, I collected qualitative data as the self-evaluation process unfolded, instead of waiting until its termination to collect data retrospectively. The real-time orientation of the study is a feature that has often been lacking in research on evaluation use, but is considered to be of primary importance, especially when studying process use with a wide range of sometimes complex and intangible consequences (see Alkin & Taut, 2003; Ciarlo, 1981; Preskill et al., 2003). What Alkin, Daillak, and White (1979) pointed out for the study of findings use is also relevant for the study of process use: "The researcher who wishes to understand the 'why' of utilization … must open up the evaluation black box and carefully study the interactions of people and events which produce the multiple consequences of evaluation and which give these consequences meaning" (p. 32).

I applied ongoing participant observations and, about two months into the process, an interview and a group discussion in order to assess the cognitive, affective, and behavioural aspects of the learning that was occurring. The participant observations were continually recorded in a reflective diary, which also included excerpts from e-mail exchanges and notes about informal conversations. The interview and group discussion were implemented based on semi-structured protocols. They were transcribed and then analyzed by extracting themes that related to the predefined indicators of process use, as well as identifying new themes. Finally, I assessed the longer-term consequences—beyond my direct involvement in the process—by sending the participants a short e-mail questionnaire six months after termination of the field portion of the study.

FINDINGS OF THE EXPLORATORY STUDY

My analyses of the data from the two evaluation processes identified the following themes related to process use: knowledge gain, evaluation skills, transfer of knowledge and skills to other situations, attitudes toward evaluation, motivation to engage in evaluation, ownership, and evaluative thinking in everyday work. Beside these intended effects of the evaluation processes, much of the discussions

and reflections dealt with the prerequisites for, and barriers to, successfully engaging in self-evaluation in the organization, constituting interesting additional findings of the study. I present below the evidence related to each of the themes I identified. Because of the exploratory nature of the study and the small number of participants, I do not present quantitative information. The aim was to explore the presence or absence of different kinds of effects of the process.

Knowledge Gain

Participants reported benefits of the evaluation process in terms of knowledge gain. Two participants reported knowledge gained about their work:

> • "I think people gave us [feedback] that we would not have thought of even if we had spent weeks and weeks."

> • "I think we now have a broader understanding of our own work and what we attempt [to do]."

Another participant talked about evaluation-related knowledge gain, namely an improved understanding of project results and how to articulate them: "That is a big thing I will always have with me: What are the results? Now I know how to articulate them."

Evaluation Skills

Knowledge and skills are closely related, but overall evaluation skills were not reported as much as other benefits. Participants noted that, although they would have applied similar methods and developed similar instruments on their own, the fact that an evaluator-facilitator was helping them ensured more successful evaluation processes: "I don't think I would have arrived at quite as polished a result by myself. … I would have done a questionnaire but I don't think it would have been as extensive or well constructed."

Transfer of Knowledge and Skills to Other Situations

Participants differed in their assessment of the likelihood they could, and their ability to, transfer the knowledge and skills they had gained in this evaluation to other situations. Two participants thought that it would be hard to do so, one of them noting that they would need

further guidance by a facilitator to be able to successfully reapply what they had learned. Another participant felt more secure about her ability to transfer her evaluation skills to other situations: "It makes me think about meetings that I organize. For example, we often have an evaluation after the meetings but I think I will be able to do it better next time. … Through the particular you can move on to the general. I think I can apply the same principles from the newsletter to a meeting, a project, and to the website eventually." More evidence about transfer of knowledge and skills was collected through the follow-up e-mail questionnaire, which is discussed below.

Attitudes Toward Evaluation

Participants had positive attitudes toward evaluation to begin with. Many of their remarks reinforced the importance of doing evaluation generally, and in particular of choosing the self-evaluation approach as implemented in this study. One participant said she thought it was "important for people to assess what they're doing, and … if you do an exercise like this, … perhaps it can make you see if your energy is going in the right direction, or if you're in fact wasting your time." In terms of which evaluation approach to choose, another participant contrasted the self-evaluation approach with external, *ex-post* evaluation: "You don't wait to come tell us what was wrong [like in an external, *ex-post* evaluation]. Now we are there to learn the [self-evaluation] process, and hopefully that will make our job better year by year instead of waiting for 10 years." His colleague added, "When you do [evaluation] internally, you can identify your weaknesses much better and you can accept them more … You are more about criticizing how they went about evaluating you than if you choose together how you are going to self-evaluate." The discussions related to attitudes toward evaluation were especially interesting because they showed that even these participants, who had positive attitudes to begin with, struggled at some point. The following two quotes illustrate that although the participants saw themselves as generally having a constructive, learning-oriented approach to mistakes, they also admitted to having some difficulty accepting the criticism that resulted from the evaluation:

> • "Not everyone would like to have someone looking at what you are doing. We are not scared about them seeing if we made a mistake and I think that is a big difference between our team and others."

• "In a sense I am glad about what we did, I mean, it forced us to see what needed to be improved … It's a right to be criticized. I think to some extent we were criticized too much because they did not realize that we treat this as a process … We have to learn to accept the learning process, which I think is hard."

Motivation to Engage in Evaluation

Motivation to engage in evaluation depends on anticipated costs and benefits of such practice: Can we do it, is it worth the effort? In self-evaluation especially it depends on the assessment of one's own capabilities to successfully carry out the tasks at hand, and the support one receives to do so. Participants said that although they were inspired by the self-evaluation workshop and convinced of the utility of the self-evaluation process they were experiencing, they still saw difficulties in implementing what they had learned in the everyday reality of their jobs in the future. One participant noted that the support by the evaluator-facilitator was crucial in this context: "I think we felt like you [the evaluator-facilitator] were helping us really, I think that motivated us very much." My participant observation notes (July 15) state that the team I worked with found the process useful not least because of the ongoing support they received: "During the meeting with the XX team, they were talking about how useful this process is and that they should keep doing it on an ongoing basis.… They also said that it is important to have an outsider be the facilitator and to ask questions, because people become blind when they are just focusing on their work. That they find it useful is also shown by the fact that they are willing to put work into it."

Ownership

There was clear evidence that participants felt ownership of the evaluation processes. They described the interaction with the facilitator as follows: "We had to answer your questions, but it was not like you were telling us [what to do], we were really doing it together. In a sense you were our partner and you were as implicated and as interested … I think your external view was really helpful." In this context one participant contrasted the chosen self-evaluation approach with an external evaluation she had experienced before: "I also think that when they evaluated us externally our attitude is like they are criticizing us. There is no real ownership … I mean we found ourselves

being defensive …" The second evaluation process produced similar feelings of collaboration: "I think it was pretty cooperative. I don't feel it was pushed or pulled too much from either side."

Evaluative Thinking Incorporated in Everyday Work

In terms of the integration of evaluative thinking into everyday work routines, participants reported that the self-evaluation process helped them introduce a new way of going about their work, "to not speak to our habits, but to be more reflective and to put it all into a system." The participant from the other self-evaluation project mentioned, "this self-evaluation made me focus on what I'm really doing and question some things that I'm doing." Informal conversations that were captured in the participant observation notes repeatedly confirm that it was "the type of thinking and organizing the work—structured and systematic" that participants learned from the process (participant observation notes, August 4, 12, and 23).

Prerequisites for, or Barriers to, Engaging Successfully in Self-evaluation Processes

Participants spent a lot of time talking about the necessary prerequisites and barriers to successfully engaging in the self-evaluation processes. Although these comments do not describe effects of the process, they do provide interesting insight into successful implementation of self-evaluation processes in real-life organizational contexts. One aspect participants talked about was whether the organization overall, and the specific team, encouraged a self-critical work style and a constructive approach to mistakes. It was the conviction of the participants that the organization in which they worked was not supportive of formative processes like the one they engaged in: "This has been a process of improvement, and this organization is not very curious with that kind of work. We know about criticism that our document should not have left, that it was too early—instead of seeing this as a necessary process, like in a democratic system…" Support by the superior was another prerequisite mentioned by the participants of both projects. In one case the participants experienced lack of support as a barrier in the self-evaluation process; in the other case the existing support of the boss was seen as an important motivating factor for engaging in the self-evaluation. Having organizational policies and structures in place for self-evaluation was mentioned as an important step in facilitating its use (participant observation notes,

August 4). Another prerequisite to successful self-evaluation that the participants mentioned was the need for a manageable project or aspect of the work as the self-evaluation object. Depending on what one does, this can sometimes be hard to pinpoint, as one participant pointed out: "I'm in a position of working on concrete things with visible results. Not everyone is in that position. I had that lady beside me at the workshop and she … had a hard time trying to single out an aspect of her work [for the self-evaluation]." Finally, one participant remarked that the guidelines and methodology used to self-evaluate needed to be flexible enough that people could adapt it to their needs and circumstances.

Follow-up Survey

I sent a short follow-up survey to the participants half a year after the termination of the field study. The survey results showed that sustained learning benefits of the initiative seemed to relate to an improved structure of, and reflection about, work processes and, in general, project planning and management skills. For example, one respondent wrote, "I'm more methodological about my work, I learned that initial planning is not time wasted but leads to more efficient targeting of results…. Large projects are less overwhelming this way, by breaking them down into phases … And it was also helpful in terms of organizing a timeline … and overall, for group work." In addition, two of the participants indicated that they ceased to think of evaluation as "added and, therefore, odd"; "that it is necessary to view evaluation as something that should be in-built." In addition, two participants described concrete examples of where they had since applied evaluative thinking in their work.

Summary

Due to their engagement in the self-evaluation processes, the professionals adopted the kind of structured, systematic thinking that is part of evaluative inquiry. They gained knowledge and skills about their projects and, to a lesser extent, about evaluation. Furthermore, they did feel that they owned the process. However, despite their motivation and positive attitudes toward self-evaluation, they doubted that they would continue the practice without the support of an expert evaluator-facilitator. Nevertheless, two of the participants reported that they had transferred skills they had learned during the self-evaluation process to other situations. The participants also noted

that there were personal and organizational obstacles to overcome: for example, when they needed backing from unsupportive superiors, when they faced the lack of structures and incentives to self-evaluate, and when they experienced the lack of routine formative processes and the absence of a learning-oriented culture in the organization. The participants emphasized that the dialogues and interactions with the "outside" facilitator, who was at the same time a supportive ally, were the main change mechanism and in large part brought about their beneficial use of the self-evaluation process.

REFLECTIONS ON CHALLENGES IN STUDYING PROCESS USE

Throughout the self-evaluation processes, interviews and participant observation provided the above-mentioned evidence of process use related to evaluative thinking, knowledge gain, attitudes, and ownership. It is difficult, however, to clearly differentiate the interventions of the self-evaluation processes from the evidence of process use. It becomes very intricate in a collaborative, interactive setting to distinguish cause and effect—that is, people's actions and reactions—in their timely succession. Take the following example: the facilitator asks a question that gets participants to think about their work, and they consequently reach a novel understanding about their project (process use); the facilitator could only have asked this useful question based on previous remarks by the participants that caused her to learn something about the participants' work and motivated her question. Perhaps process use in particular can only happen if both the evaluator-facilitator and the participants embark on a mutual learning experience representative of a collaborative process.

Along these lines, Schwandt (2005) describes a pedagogical approach to evaluation, where research and practice coincide: "In such a process, one cannot neatly decouple the act of doing inquiry or evaluation from the act of its use. This raises the likelihood that evaluators begin to take on the characteristics of an action researcher" (p. 103). This seems to run counter to Henry and Mark's (2003) assertion that we should "combine change processes into causal pathways … to formulate working hypotheses about evaluation outcomes" (p. 311), and then conduct studies to confirm or refute them. In this manner it would be possible to generate context-specific, idiosyncratic "mini-theories" linking evaluation activities with evaluation outcomes. In this exploratory study the skills of the evaluator-facilitator, the characteristics of the individual participants or teams, the evaluation approach, and the context in which the process took place all inter-

acted in complex ways. Based on this experience it seems that future research on process use needs to include all these factors to produce studies rich enough to further illuminate the complex interactions at play. However, such in-depth studies may eventually be followed by studies that include bigger samples, apply standardized assessment instruments to measure process use indicators, and thus arrive at more generalizable findings.

The evidence collected during the self-evaluation processes also showed that there are different kinds of process use, as defined by Alkin and Taut (2003): namely, instrumental, conceptual, and symbolic process use (see Literature section for definitions). The following quotations illustrate these different types of process use. As are those above, they are taken from the study's interviews, conversations, and e-mail exchanges with the participants. The first is an example of instrumental process use: "We are still in the process, but I think the feedback we [already] received helped us very much to improve this [educational policy] document." Examples of conceptual process use include the following statements: "There are things people told us that we would not have thought about even if we had spent weeks and weeks"; "We learned to identify and accept our weaknesses without being defensive, because we chose together how to do the self-evaluating"; "You made us think in terms of impact, in terms of results—I always knew this was needed, but I now know how to articulate it better." Finally, here is an example of symbolic process use: "The process created ownership for our document out there, some people took part and contributed to it and will now be more likely to use it." It seems that process use, just like findings use, can in fact be further differentiated into instrumental, conceptual, and symbolic aspects.

These findings confirm that the kinds of uses that may result from the process of evaluation are indeed similar to the ones that may follow the reception of evaluation findings. Knowing about these different types of process use, and their operationalization, helps us as evaluators to plan for such changes and recognize them when they occur (or notice their absence). Process use means that new insights are created and consumed from start to finish in the evaluation process, and that producing the evaluation report with the final results is only one last step in the entire learning experience. Thus, even though it may occasionally be possible to see findings use without preceding process use—mainly when the findings confirm existing beliefs, or when findings use is "imposed," as discussed by Weiss, Murphy-Graham, and Birkeland (2005)—process use usually constitutes an enabling

condition for findings use. Therefore exists the great importance of this notion for the evaluation profession.

In summary, the notion of process use has been helpful for the evaluation profession because it raises awareness by both evaluators and clients that the use of evaluation is not limited to findings and that, in fact, evaluations should be planned so that process use is maximized—not least because this seems to increase the likelihood of findings use. In fact, process use indicators are similar to findings use indicators, and both process and findings can be used conceptually, instrumentally, and symbolically. The process use notion is "built into" collaborative evaluation approaches, but because of the linkage of process use and findings use, other evaluation approaches must also take it into consideration if their results are to be used. Observing and measuring indicators of process use is a complex undertaking when attempting to differentiate cause (evaluation process) from effect (its intended use). An initial methodological approach, exemplified in the exploratory study I described, is to conduct real-time qualitative research, building on its strength to account adequately for the complexities of contextual, evaluation-related, and human factors.

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