UNDERSTANDING ORGANIZATION CAPACITY FOR EVALUATION: SYNTHESIS AND INTEGRATION

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Abstract: The special issue is devoted to the examination of organizational capacity for evaluation and evaluation capacity building (ECB) through empirical inquiry. The compilation consists of two quantitative surveys of evaluators and seven single or multiple case studies across a broad array of organizations in a diverse contexts (e.g., east-central Ontario, California, Hawaii, Minnesota, and Israel). In this final article, the authors look across the collection of studies to identify emerging themes and trends with implications for ECB. The emergent themes are defining ECB; conceptualizing ECB outcomes; organizational context; ECB implementation issues; and enabling factors and barriers to organizational evaluation capacity development.

Résumé :   Ce numéro spécial de la Revue examine la capacité organisationnelle en évaluation et le renforcement des capacités d'évaluation (RCÉ) de façon empirique. Le numéro spécial met en vedette deux sondages auprès d'évaluateurs et sept études de cas (cas unique ou multiple) auprès d'organismes œuvrant dans une variété de régions géographiques (e.g., l'Ontario du centre-est, la Californie, Hawaii, le Minnesota, et l'Israël). Dans l'article présenté ici, les auteurs identifient les thèmes et les courants qui émergent de ces études ainsi que les enjeux auxquels font face ceux qui désirent renforcer les capacités d'évaluation de leur organisme. Les thèmes identifiés sont la définition du RCÉ, ses résultats, le contexte organisationnel, la mise en œuvre d'activités visant le RCÉ, et les facteurs habilitant ou limitant le processus dans les organisations.

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███████ The intent of this special issue of the *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation* was to compile a set of empirical studies on organizational evaluation capacity and evaluation capacity building (ECB). The approach moves the field forward by transcending narrative accounts of capacity building efforts, which have made up the bulk of the ECB literature to this point. At this juncture in the development of the ECB knowledge base, empirical research offers us the opportunity to test theories or verify our assumptions about how best to build evaluation capacity in organizations. Because this is a relatively new area of evaluation research, the range of empirical studies on ECB varies widely and includes both single case studies conducted in one specific organizational context as well as broader research that compares conceptions of evaluation capacity and ECB efforts across a number of different organizations and jurisdictions. The nine studies included in this issue echo this diversity—a great deal of variability can be found not only in the scope of the studies, but also in the units of analysis, the focus of ECB activities, and the success of ECB efforts presented. The studies are all quite different, yet a number of common elements can be derived from them. This final article in the special issue summarizes some of the key emergent themes as a next step in the creation and sharing of knowledge about organizational capacity for evaluation and ECB. and sets the stage for ongoing empirical research in the area.

DESCRIPTION OF STUDIES

We have summarized the focus for research, unit of analysis, and methods used in the nine studies to provide some context for the ensuing thematic analysis. The results appear in Table 1. The studies had as research focuses either understanding organizational capacity for evaluation or describing and evaluating ECB initiatives with a view to deriving "lessons learned." It can be seen that a range of study methods were used, including quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods approaches. The unit of analysis varied from individual participants or respondents to organizations as the focus for a case study. It can be said that each and every study included in the collection transcended the reflective narrative approach to knowledge development that is becoming increasingly common in evaluation journals (Amo & Cousins, 2007; Chouinard & Cousins, 2007; Cousins, Goh, Clark, & Lee, 2004). Taken as a whole, the methodological diversity represented here makes this collection the first of its kind, certainly in the ECB domain of inquiry, and quite probably in many streams of interest in our field.

Table 1
Summary of Studies

Authors	Research focus	Unit of analysis	Methods used
Cousins et al.	Comparative study of internal evaluators' attitudes and perceptions related to organizational evaluation capacity	Individual	Questionnaire survey of Canadian internal evaluators
Fleischer, Christie, & LaVelle	Descriptive study of attitudes and perceptions related to ECB and evaluation use	Individual	Questionnaire survey of AEA members
Lawrenz, Thomas, Huffman, and Covington Clarkson	Comparison of two schools using a collaborative immersion approach to ECB	Organization	Mutiple case study: Interviews and observation in 2 schools
Rosenstein and Englert	Empirical case study of one school using three different conceptual frameworks	Organization	Case study: Interviews, document review, focus groups, participant observation
Higa and Brandon	Participatory evaluation and ECB through the lens of a Vygotskian framework	Individual	Interviews of program community participants in 9 schools
Bourgeois and Cousins	Analysis of path taken by four Canadian government organizations based on a conceptual framework of evaluation capacity	Organization	Based on original sequenced interview study
Preskill and Boyle	Comparison of 15 organizations involved in ECB efforts	Organization	Interview study
Volkov	Study of ECB efforts in a private foundation	Organization	Qualitative case study: participant observation
Compton, MacDonald, Baizerman and Schooley	Example of program support through ECB defined as technical assistance	Organization	Interviews and ECB Checklist

DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTIONS OF ECB

The definition of evaluation capacity building is at the very core of the research conducted on its implementation and success. Although the definitions used in each of the nine studies varied somewhat, a commonly quoted definition was the one developed by Stockdill, Baizerman, and Compton (2002, p. 8): "the intentional work to con-

tinuously create and sustain overall organizational processes that make quality evaluation and its use routine." In addition to this specific definition, other elements included in the studies reviewed focused on the development of evaluation knowledge, skills, and attitudes, the sustainability of professional evaluation practices, and the resources to engage in ongoing evaluation work. One interesting aspect of ECB presented by Fleischer, Christie, and LaVelle in their survey research focuses on the fact that evaluators still tend to perceive evaluation capacity as an ideal rather than as a reality. This speaks to the challenges related to the implementation of ECB at an organizational level and the sustained effort required to maintain an organization's capacity to do and use evaluation (see also Volkov). It also raises interesting issues associated with how evaluators define ECB in their own organizations, especially if they focus on its ideal, rather than practical, state.

Beyond the general definition of ECB, the studies also identified and used various conceptual models to describe the relationships between specific elements of evaluation capacity. For instance, Cousins et al. present a conceptual framework, an evolved version of one published earlier (Cousins et al., 2004), as a basis for the design of a pan-Canadian survey of internal evaluators. The conceptual framework focuses on key concepts such as organizational learning, organizational support structures, and sources of knowledge, skills, and abilities. Rosenstein and Englert use a framework developed by King (2002) to identify the four components of successful ECB. This model, called "Four Commonplaces of Learning," includes students, teachers, context, and curriculum, defined through the role of each element in ECB. In other words, the "students" are those building their personal evaluation capacity, the **"teachers" are those facilitating ECB activi**ties, the "context" is related to the organization, and the curriculum is made up of the activities selected as part of the ECB process. A third model, used by Higa and Brandon, features a Vygotskian approach to analyze the factors that lead to learning in an ECB context, thereby privileging learning as fundamental to any ECB process. We observe that the differences among the three models or theoretical approaches also reflect the differences between the units of analysis (i.e., individual, organizational) used in each of the studies.

One distinction that emerges across several of the studies is the differentiation of direct vs. indirect ECB (Cousins et al.; Lawrenz, Thomas, Huffman, & Covington Clarkson; Rosenstein & Englert; Volkov). This distinction was originally credited to Stockdill et al.

(2002): direct ECB connotes the use of formal and informal training opportunities (workshops, short courses, graduate studies) to build capacity, whereas indirect ECB refers to capacity development occuring as a consequence of proximity to evaluation, sometimes called process use (Amo & Cousins, 2007; Patton, 2008).

DESIRED OUTCOMES OF ECB

The goals or desired outcomes of ECB were found to be fairly consistent across studies, and mainly focused on organizations' or individuals' capacity to *do* (conduct) evaluation and their capacity to *use* evaluation. The capacity to do evaluation, in particular, was a major theme in all of the studies reviewed, and was generally defined as an increase in evaluation knowledge and skills at either the individual or organizational level. This includes an increase in the capacity to design evaluation studies, to conduct data collection and analysis activities, and to report on evaluation findings. The survey report produced by Cousins et al. as well as the framework of evaluation capacity used by Bourgeois and Cousins both prominently feature organizational capacity to do evaluation as an expected outcome of ECB activities. In terms of actual research findings, Preskill and Boyle state specifically in their article that the ECB efforts undertaken have increased participants' evaluation knowledge, skills, and attitudes. In particular, participants were found to be better able to design data collection instruments and report more effectively to evaluation stakeholders. Along the same lines, Rosenstein and Englert found that participants in their study increased their capacity to do evaluation over time, defined as a lower level of reliance on external support and more evaluation projects undertaken within the organization under study.

The capacity to use evaluation, defined as the use of findings for decision-making as well as the development of evaluative thinking in an organization (process use), was also found to be a common element across several studies. For instance, Bourgeois and Cousins refer to three dimensions of capacity to use in the framework used to guide the study presented in this issue: evaluation literacy, organizational decision-making, and learning benefits. The first two dimensions focus on the use of findings, while the latter primarily describes process use. ECB was linked to evaluation use in the survey of American Evaluation Association (AEA) members conducted by Fleischer et al., which further lends credibility to the role of ECB in achieving this outcome. At the practitioner level, Preskill and Boyle identified

in their study that individuals who received evaluation training are not only able to ask better and more frequent questions about their programs, but they are also able to use evaluation findings more often. Similar findings were identified by Lawrenz et al. as well as by Rosenstein and Englert, although both articles are careful to specify that the development of an individual's capacity to do evaluation precedes their ability to use evaluation results and to think more evaluatively.

ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

The organizational context within which ECB activities are implemented was found to have a considerable impact on the success of these initiatives and the ability of organizations to maintain their level of evaluation capacity over time. Organizational support structures, culture, and learning were particularly found to be important factors in the success of ECB in the studies included in this issue.

Organizational support structures are generally thought of as the resources needed to support evaluation and ECB activities. These include the systems that support learning, evaluation, and program planning in an organization, such as performance measurement systems, HR development systems, and financial resources dedicated to evaluation, as identified by Cousins et al. and Bourgeois and Cousins. In addition to these, Compton et al. also identify instances in which survey and other data-related resources were provided to states in support of evaluation and program planning. Volkov confirms the importance of such resources in his study, which found that sufficient resources are required in order for both evaluation and ECB to be implemented successfully in an organization.

Organizational culture was also thought by many authors to be an important factor in successful ECB initiatives. Elements of organizational culture likely to influence ECB include a leadership supportive of continuous learning and improvement, an organizational attitude that considers evaluation as an opportunity to learn, and the existence of a common understanding of evaluation throughout an organization. For instance, Preskill and Boyle describe organizational culture as a climate that is supportive of ECB activities and processes. Their findings point to a change in attitude as a change in organizational culture: "Nearly all of the interviewees mentioned that participants appear more willing to engage in evaluation-related work and seem to believe that evaluation contributes to the organi-

zation's success" (p. 161). Lawrenz et al. also consider a culture of evaluation to be imbued in an organization's strategic positioning methods, continuous improvement strategies, work plan development and assessment, staff development policies, general attitudes toward change, and procedures for project and individual reviews.

Organizational learning, a construct that was central to the Cousins et al. framework, was seen as an outcome of ECB activities in most studies reviewed. For instance, Lawrenz and associates focused on the organizational learning component of ECB in her work: "Working together through a real evaluation that was directly connected to organizational issues led to a continuous improvement cycle through which evaluation was used as a tool to create change in the organization" (p. 64). At a more theoretical level, Bourgeois and Cousins focused on organizational learning by describing the four stages of ECB, which are thought to represent the general path followed by organizations as they build their evaluation capacity and engage in organizational learning. Interestingly, organizational learning was also considered to be a driver of ECB initiatives. For example, Preskill and Boyle present an organizational need to meet the requirements of funders and be more effective and competitive in grant applications as a driver toward ECB. This outlines a different facet of organizational learning and change and places it at the start of ECB rather than at the end of the process, where it has been traditionally situated.

IMPLEMENTATION OF ECB ACTIVITIES

A major component of the studies included in this issue focuses on how ECB activities were implemented in various organizations. Several studies discussed the role of the internal or external evaluator in ECB, the extent to which stakeholders were involved in ECB, and the choice of either direct or indirect ECB activities. Finally, some of the authors investigated intentionality and strategy as it relates to the design and implementation of ECB initiatives.

The role of evaluators in ECB was found to vary across the studies reviewed. According to most of the articles, internal evaluators identify potential ECB opportunities and provide mentoring and coaching to ECB participants, while external evaluators tend to provide formal training as well as information and advice to ECB participants. Preskill and Boyle, in particular, provide examples of both roles: in six of the organizations featured in their study, internal evaluators were

responsible for implementing various learning processes and helped staff generate evaluation questions and action plans, as well as provided assistance for data analysis through evaluation mentoring, technical assistance, and peer review. In nine other organizations, Preskill and Boyle found that ECB activities were facilitated by external evaluators, who generally provided formal evaluation training. These evaluator roles were also consistent with those identified by Lawrenz et al. as well as Rosenstein and Englert and to some extent by Higa and Brandon. In most of the studies reviewed, the selection of an internal or external evaluator as facilitator of ECB appears to be made based on the availability of each type of evaluator and their capability in terms of training and mentoring.

Stakeholder involvement was also clearly outlined in most of the studies reviewed. Typically, program staff and managers make up the bulk of ECB participants, and the activities selected focus directly on the learning needs of these individuals. An important point raised by Preskill and Boyle, worthy of further research consideration, is that not all staff members need the same evaluation knowledge and skills, nor do they all share the same starting point in terms of existing evaluation knowledge and skills. A major challenge for evaluators, therefore, is to match individual participants' learning needs with specific ECB strategies that apply to all participants. A particularly interesting example of stakeholder involvement that may further expand our understanding of this factor in long-term ECB success is presented in the article by Lawrenz et al., where ECB was originally conducted with a small group of teachers; in subsequent years, the number of teachers involved in ECB grew, with the original group acting as leaders and facilitators. This example may represent a solution for organizations unable to retain the services of an internal evaluator.

As mentioned above, direct ECB is generally defined as on-site workshops and formal training, such as university courses. Alternatively, indirect ECB involves participation in evaluation activities under the guidance of a trained evaluator, framed by technical assistance, mentoring, coaching, and the provision of written materials. One example of indirect ECB can be found in practical participatory evaluation (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998), where stakeholders "learn by doing." Many studies included in this issue report using both types of approaches as part of their ECB initiatives. Particular examples include the articles authored by Lawrenz et al. and Rosenstein and Englert. Other studies, such as the one by Compton et al., advocate a

direct approach to ensure results. Regardless of the type of approach selected, some of the studies make specific recommendations meant to increase the success of ECB initiatives. For example, Higa and Brandon discuss the most appropriate number of participants in a workshop session while Lawrenz advocates the use of an immersion approach based on a collaborative evaluation experience.

An interesting new concept found in studies of ECB implementation is that of intentionality. In most studies reviewed (in this issue and elsewhere), ECB tends to emerge through an organic process within an organization. In other words, no specific planning is undertaken prior to the implementation of ECB activities, and no particular goals or objectives other than general capacity building are articulated by evaluators or organizational leaders. One example found in this issue is provided in the study authored by Preskill and Boyle, where none of the 15 sites examined began with an overall evaluation capacity building plan. A few had prespecified learning objectives, and a few others took into account adult learning principles and individual learning styles in the design and implementation of specific ECB activities. For the most part, however, the ECB approach selected seemed to be largely serendipitous and opportunistic. Other articles in this issue also deal with intentionality and the need to plan an ECB strategy at the outset of the process: for example, Fleischer et al. encourage organizations to link ECB and intentionality as a means to increase organizational learning and change. In the same vein, Compton et al. state that it is necessary for an organization to make itself an explicit ECB organization in philosophy and in practice. Bourgeois and Cousins focus on the means by which organizations can make ECB more intentional and strategic by proposing four levels of evaluation capacity through which organizations can first assess their existing capacity. Further, they link the levels of evaluation capacity to the stages of capacity building outlined in the article, and by so doing, they suggest practical approaches that can be developed as part of an intentional and strategic ECB initiative.

ENABLERS AND BARRIERS

A number of enabling factors for ECB were identified in the studies reviewed. These echo many of the themes described previously and serve as useful "lessons learned" in the design and implementation of ECB approaches. Examples of enabling factors found in this issue include:

- *Number of people involved in evaluation activities:* According to Higa and Brandon, the number of people involved with evaluation and the quality of their involvement are directly related to the quality of the evaluation activities. These authors propose that more involvement generally results in a longer organizational memory, as long as the involvement of each individual is meaningful and enables them to build their own personal evaluation capacity.
- *Organizational leadership:* Volkov highlights in his article that organizational leaders committed to ECB increases the likelihood that resources will be dedicated to ECB initiatives and that evaluation will be used in organizational decision-making.
- *Relationships within the organization:* The presence of strong relationships between different parts of the organization was identified by Preskill and Boyle as one of the enabling factors of ECB, allowing for easy access to the information and people needed to conduct a successful evaluation project. An element of this is, of course, the relationship among evaluators and organization members, an issue raised for consideration by Cousins et al. in discussing their findings
- *Organizational climate:* Lawrenz et al. focus on the need to adjust ECB efforts to the organizational climate, similar to the organizational culture. In order for ECB to be successful, these authors posit that participants need to feel comfortable with collecting data about their own behaviours.

Some of the barriers encountered in the studies reviewed here include evaluation fatigue, internal politics, a lack of ECB strategy, and staff turnover. In many of the studies, these barriers resulted in poorer evaluation capacity or in a failure of ECB initiatives. Although some of these barriers can be remedied by the evaluators responsible for ECB, some require stronger intervention, often by organizational leaders, in order for the ECB initiatives to achieve some measure of success.

An interesting observation stemming from an overview of this issue is that some of the tensions or difficulties encountered in the studies reported here can result in either enablers or barriers for successful ECB. For instance, the roles of internal evaluators compared to those of external evaluators, the use of evaluation for learning as opposed to evaluation for accountability, and the varying definitions used within the context of evaluation can all impact ECB positively

or negatively, depending on organizational context and other factors.

AGENDA FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Some of the issues raised in the studies reported here point to a number of areas in which further research is needed. For example, the effectiveness of direct and indirect ECB approaches should be further investigated to identify those that lead to greater success in certain conditions; a complementary area of research might look into the role of internal and external evaluators engaged in the design and implementation of ECB activities, also to shed light on best practices concerning the implementation of ECB in organizations.

The distinction between the capacity to do evaluation and the capacity to use it is an important one. More needs to be known about the integration of evaluative thinking among demand-side organization members. Cousins, Goh, and Clark (2005) conjectured that finding ways to have demand decision makers experience the successful use of evaluation will lead to greater acceptance of it as a lever for organizational change: that is, data use leads to data valuing. It can be argued that some of the studies in this collection add support to the hypothesis (e.g., Rosenstein & Englert, Preskill & Boyle) but further directed research would be of great benefit.

Because ECB is a relatively new area of research, the short- and long-term outcomes of ECB (which could also be called "ECB evaluation") need to be identified and studied further. The value of ECB to organizations over time will be made clearer by such investigations and could identify the most appropriate means to reach desired outcomes. At the opposite end of the ECB spectrum, further studies are needed on the design and development of intentional and strategic organizational plans concerning evaluation capacity. More specifically, empirical data are required at this point regarding the success of organizations with long-term ECB strategies compared with organizations that implement piecemeal evaluation approaches.

Methodologically, this issue of the *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation* presents empirical studies rather than the more common narrative articles published on ECB. Although this represents a considerable step forward in the study of ECB, more of these empirical studies are needed to continue to build and share knowledge on ECB practices and outcomes. A quick overview of the methods used in the nine studies reported in this issue clearly identifies interviews as

the preferred choice among researchers. Although these are clearly necessary in the investigation of ECB, other methods should also be used in future studies to triangulate findings and generate new knowledge about ECB.

CONCLUSION

The studies reported in this special issue have contributed to the verification of commonly held assumptions regarding organizational capacity for evaluation and ECB activities and have generated new knowledge on the implementation and success of such initiatives. In particular, the insights gained from discussions of intentionality and strategy merit further attention in the research literature, as do continued observations on ECB outcomes in the long term. This issue contributes to our evolving understanding of ECB in organizations and serves as a new launch pad for ongoing empirical investigations in this area.

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