ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED DURING A DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR EVALUATION PRACTICE

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Abstract: This article describes three challenges encountered during a developmental evaluation and explains how these were addressed from the evaluators' perspective. The evaluation was conducted to support the implementation of a three-year educational technology leadership project funded by the Alberta provincial government. The developmental evaluation responded to two purposes identified by the evaluation client: inform ongoing programmatic decisions and measure change in practice. The implications for evaluation practice related to the challenges of introducing a new evaluation approach, defining the boundaries of evaluator roles, and integrating technological resources are discussed and related to the Canadian Evaluator Competencies (Canadian Evaluation Society, 2010) and the Program Evaluation Standards (Yarborough, Shulha, Hopson, & Carruthers, 2011).

Résumé :   Cet article décrit trois défis rencontrés lors d'une évaluation d'un programme et explique comment ils ont été adressés selon la perspective des évaluateurs. L'évaluation visait à soutenir la mise en œuvre d'un programme de leadership déployé grâce à l'utilisation de technologies éducatives. L'évaluation de ce programme de trois ans financé par le gouvernement de l'Alberta a répondu à deux buts identifiés par le client : informer les décisions concernant la mise en œuvre des programmes en cours ainsi que de mesurer les changements dans de pratiques de leadership. Les implications pour la pratique de l'évaluation concernant les habiletés des évaluateurs à introduire une approche nouvelle de l'évaluation, à délimiter leurs rôles, et à bien intégrer les ressources technologiques sont discutées en rapport aux compétences des évaluateurs (Société canadienne d'évaluation, 2010) et

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aux normes d'évaluation des programmes (Yarborough, Shulha, Hopson, & Carruthers, 2011).

WHY WAS THE EVALUATION CONDUCTED? WHAT DID THE CLIENT WANT TO LEARN?

▬▬▬▬▬ This evaluation addressed the implementation of a three-year (2008–2011), provincially-funded educational technology leadership project. Funds were allocated to local school jurisdictions in the province of Alberta, Canada, for projects that developed innovative leadership practices in effective technology use and management. Technology leadership responsibilities were decentralized from the district technology office to 64 local school administrators within a geographically diverse school district. Decentralization meant that the administrators were expected to (a) model uses of emerging technology, (b) support teachers in a digital-age learning culture, (c) cultivate champions to share technology leadership, and (d) develop a strong shared vision of technology use. Five district administrators were designated as Educational Technology Leads (ETLs) who each supported administrators from approximately 10 schools in this work, with the assistance of two Technology Integration Facilitators (TIFs) tasked with working directly with teachers across the district. The District Technology Coordinator (DTC) sought to understand the process through which administrators integrated their new technology leadership responsibilities with their existing duties. The DTC acted as the evaluation client and project lead, and was ultimately responsible for providing annual funding reports on project outcomes.

The evaluation team selected a developmental evaluation (DE) approach in response to the developmental nature of the project, specifically the client's need for ongoing access to information to inform project decisions. As a mechanism for supporting ongoing program and organizational development, a DE approach represents a radical shift from traditional program evaluation approaches, in that the process is not predicated on pre-established evaluation goals, time constraints, or a detached role for the evaluator (Patton, 1994, 1999, 2008, 2011). Therefore, the usefulness of the DE approach is aligned with the project's need for developing the roles of the ETLs and incorporating emergent effective school-based leadership practices for supporting and managing rapid technology changes. To that end, the DTC welcomed a more integrated role for the evaluator within this project, to stimulate discussion among the project team members and to use evaluative logic to facilitate data-informed programmatic and organizational decisions. To optimize access to up-to-date informa-

tion for informing development, the developmental evaluator must pay attention to changes in the program's context if the evaluation findings and processes are to remain relevant and meet the emerging programmatic information needs (Gamble, 2006). During this project the evaluation team worked collaboratively with the project team to (a) identify informational needs, (b) access relevant data sources, and (c) use the findings to inform project decisions as needed.

WHAT RESOURCES (TIME, MONEY, IN-KIND, ETC.) WERE AVAILABLE FOR CONDUCTING THE EVALUATION? WERE THEY SUITABLE FOR ANSWERING THE EVALUATION QUESTIONS?

At the time the proposal was written, the evaluation resources, representing 10% of the total project budget, were divided equally among the three years. At the end of the first year, the evaluation team realized that the evaluation had been underresourced, but by the end of the second year the evaluation team had addressed this deficit by building upon existing processes for documenting project decisions and facilitating use of findings. During the final year, the project team had begun assuming some of the responsibilities undertaken at the beginning by the evaluation team. The evaluation team comprised two evaluators, who were supported by a research assistant. The majority of the funding supported the evaluation activities undertaken by Howery, who served as the client's primary contact. With previous DE experience and extensive methods expertise, Poth served primarily as a consultant.

WHAT CHALLENGES DID YOU FACE IN CONDUCTING THIS EVALUATION? HOW DID THE CHALLENGES IMPEDE THE EVALUATION? HOW WERE THE CHALLENGES ADDRESSED?

Major challenges encountered were (a) introducing a new evaluation approach, (b) defining the boundaries of evaluator roles, and (c) integrating technological resources. This section describes each challenge and its effects on the evaluation, attempts to address the challenge (including the extent to which it may have been anticipated), and strategies to overcome these challenges in the future.

Introducing a New Evaluation Approach

DE was introduced to the client as a new way to conduct an evaluation. The DTC had previously been involved in evaluations whose focus was to generate data for measuring project outcomes, but now

the focus was to support project development and implementation. The new approach caused tension during the data collection phase in the first year. On several occasions, the DTC sought to collect baseline data in order to measure outcomes related to technology practice changes, yet developing instruments to measure outcomes was impossible given that the project was still being developed. The evaluation team intervened in an educative capacity, acknowledging the DTC's need to meet accountability requirements and offering to help develop instruments to guide project development and measure change. Attention to and care in dealing with expectations associated with previous experiences, as described here, are just one of the challenges associated with using a new evaluation approach. Furthermore, throughout the evaluation, stakeholders participated in implementing, interpreting, and subsequently refining the observation protocol. For example, in response to needs identified at the end of the first year, an administrator observation protocol administered during the second year informed the development of project activities and measured change in classroom technology practice. These capacity-building efforts took time away from data collection and integration for project development, but served an important purpose for sustaining efforts beyond the life of the evaluation.

Based on previous evaluation experiences, the team realized in retrospect that it might have anticipated challenges arising from a new evaluation approach. During a recent evaluation of an interprofessional education initiative, Poth (2008) found similar tension in the discrepancy between summative purposes associated with traditional evaluation approaches (i.e., measuring project outcomes) and developmental purposes associated with DE approaches (i.e., supporting ongoing project development). The current evaluation's result was noteworthy in that stakeholders gained an understanding of DE's added value in innovative project development contexts and increased their participation in evaluation activities supporting project development.

To mitigate challenges related to introducing a new evaluation approach, the evaluation team suggests adopting a collaborative approach so the project team can gain confidence that their accountability needs will be met. To guide practice, the evaluation team recommends following two Program Evaluation Standards (Yarborough, Shulha, Hopson, & Carruthers, 2011): (a) the third Utility Standard related to continually renegotiating evaluation purposes according to stakeholders' needs, and (b) the first Propriety Standard related to the need for evaluations to respond to stakeholders and their com-

munities. In the current evaluation, the evaluation's team response to the stakeholders' concerns allowed for trust to be established and stakeholder capacity to be developed that in turn met the stakeholders' needs.

Defining the Boundaries of Evaluator Roles

The evaluation team facilitated many of the initial project activities, such as arranging meetings to discuss emerging data and providing summaries of meetings. As the project unfolded, the client became increasingly reliant on the team to provide guidance during key decision-making points. The evaluation team saw this shift as indicative of their acceptance as project team members; however, the increased time commitment created a challenge in defining the boundaries of the evaluator role. For example, at the end of the second year, the evaluation team brought forward data that revealed a lack of alignment between some technology activities and the overall project goals. In response, the DTC requested that administrators submit a technology plan prior to distributing technology to their schools, and that the evaluation team contribute to a template for the plan. During a subsequent discussion among the evaluation team, a debate ensued about whether the template was an instrument that the evaluators could use to inform development and thus within the bounds of the evaluators' role to develop.

To address the challenge of defining the boundaries of evaluator roles, the evaluation team agreed that although a timely response to emerging collaborative opportunities seemed logical within DE, this placed additional demands on the evaluation team. In order to clarify the limits of their role, the evaluation team discussed appropriate roles and presented these in a meeting with the DTC. This meeting established that the evaluation team would respond only to data informing project development; in other situations, such as implementation logistics, decisions would be left to the project team.

Although the discussion helped define the evaluation activities, the evaluation team still experienced situations where the boundary between project and evaluation activities overlapped. The evaluation team continued to contribute to activities where an opportunity for capacity building was a likely outcome—for instance, working collaboratively with stakeholders to build skills related to developing valid and reliable data collection instruments so that the project team could begin to gather their own evidence of change. The DTC

received an outcomes-focused survey from the government-hired external researcher at the end of the first year, and the evaluation team recognized this as an opportunity to build the DTC's knowledge and skills related to instrument development. Together they undertook a critique and discussion related to the limitations of the instrument, which was continued by the project team at the end of the evaluation team's contract.

Even though the evaluation team had anticipated offering ongoing access to information to support project activities' development, the time required to provide this access was difficult to calculate. A dearth of examples of DE practice meant that the team was unable to predict the time and resources dedicated to facilitating conversations between client and project team members to build shared understandings of project goals. As the project activities were developing, the evaluation team helped the project team assess the alignment of those activities with the goals.

To guide practice, the evaluation team recommends drawing on two Program Evaluation Standards (Yarborough et al., 2011): (a) the fourth Feasibility Standard related to using resources effectively, and (b) the fifth Utility Standard related to serving the emergent needs of stakeholders. Activities related to reviewing the project goals during the current evaluation were critical for creating a learning organization. One of the intended evaluation outcomes was to support the generation of new ideas and practices in educational technology leadership within the district. The goal was to move these new ideas and practices into daily business that would continue after the project's end. Explicitly discussing the organizational learning goal with the project team at the evaluation outset is critical to the perceived success of the evaluation in meeting this goal.

Integrating Technological Resources

One of the evaluation team's main responsibilities was facilitating ongoing access to data for informing project decisions. The online social networking tool that collected data from mandated weekly administrator postings offered a challenge to the evaluators with respect to data quality. While the administrators' postings were intended to provide the administrators with an outlet for sharing experiences and resources, when generated they reflected only successful technology experiences. These findings often contradicted reports from the ETLs and TIFs working alongside their colleagues in the schools. It soon

became apparent that the administrators were unsure how the postings were being used and, as a result, may have feared the judgement of their colleagues.

To address challenges related to data reliability and validity, the evaluation team proposed to the DTC that heightened clarity in describing data use was necessary for administrators to become comfortable with online postings. The DTC modelled his expectations for administrators' postings, and also supported the evaluation team's idea to use focused questions in order to guide online discussions and reflections. The analysis of these focused questions revealed increased alignment with anecdotal evidence.

The evaluation team was surprised by the technological challenges involved in data collection within a technology-focused project. Upon reflection, the evaluation team recognized that their assumption that administrators would be comfortable using technology as a medium for data collection was overly optimistic. To guide practice, the evaluation team recommends following two Program Evaluation Standards (Yarborough et al., 2011): (a) the third Accuracy Standard related to gathering reliable information from evaluation procedures, and (b) the eighth Utility Standard related to promoting responsible use while guarding against unintended negative consequences. The evaluation team had to use clear and adaptive communication strategies with the project participants, as well as make time for ongoing reflection about the evaluation instruments' reliability, so that they could surmount the challenges associated with technology.

WHAT, IF ANY, ARE THE SYSTEMIC ISSUES THAT THE EVALUATION COMMUNITY SHOULD ADDRESS?

The challenges experienced are inherent to a 21st-century evaluation process; specifically, agility within evaluation approaches and methods has the strong potential to increase evaluation use within dynamic contexts (Gauthier et al., 2010; Patton, 2011). Greater attention from the evaluation community to the situational practice domain will better position an evaluation to respond to dynamic contexts. Situational practice competencies "focus on the application of evaluative thinking in analyzing and attending to the unique interests, issues, and contextual circumstances in which evaluation skills are being applied" (Canadian Evaluation Society, 2010, p. 4). We believe competencies related to situational practice are difficult to teach directly and therefore must be experienced and reflected upon in order to guide

future practice. As such the evaluation team suggests three research foci that are necessary to further guide practice:

- *Research highlighting relationship building as a key characteristic for promoting evaluation use:* Emerging literature emphasizes stakeholder relationships as necessary for evaluations to remain relevant and useful (Patton, 2011). Trust, established early in the process, must be reinforced throughout so that when issues arise, open and honest communication can occur (Poth, 2008). What is currently missing in the literature are examples showing how trust is established and maintained by evaluation activities across different evaluation contexts.

- *Guiding principles for the appropriate integration of technology in evaluation processes*: The context of the 21st century requires that the paramount concerns of technical competence and proper adherence to confidentiality standards are addressed. It is helpful to have an evaluation team member who is fairly technologically savvy and has at least some familiarity with the project's technological environments. This will likely continue to be an area of challenge for all evaluations as technology permeates all realms of society (Markham & Baym, 2009). Currently, the literature does not address how the appropriateness of Internet-based methods across different evaluation contexts is assessed.

- *Broadened implementation of DE practices focused on intentional capacity building for supporting innovation:* The only thing we can be sure of in DE is change; this dynamic environment renders a fluid project and evaluation process. Projects that foster innovation in 21st-century environments do not have a clear path, and if evaluation is to play a larger role in such situations, greater comfort with complexity is necessary (Westley, Zimmerman, & Patton, 2006). Using a DE approach to intentionally build capacity is necessary if we want organizations to learn and embed evaluative inquiry (Preskill & Boyle, 2008). Thus, it will be necessary to build a body of knowledge around DE with particular emphasis on sharing experiences from both the evaluator and stakeholder perspectives. Missing in the literature are further examples of how the DE approach supports capacity building in practice.

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