Leveraging Mixed Methods Designs for Promoting Evaluation and Evaluation Capacity Building

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Abstract: *Limited evaluation capacity, power dynamics, and resource constraints act as organizational barriers that inhibit evaluations in higher education contexts. Evaluation capacity promotes evaluation and minimizes the impact of these barriers. Embedding a synergistic combination of qualitative and quantitative methods within an evaluation and evaluation capacity building (ECB) initiative was our attempt to address these organizational barriers. In this practice note, we illustrate how MM designs catalyze evaluative thinking that promotes evaluation and supports ECB efforts. Our use and integration of MM strategies to build evaluation capacity and infuse evaluation into organizational culture informs higher education evaluation capacity-building initiatives.*

Keywords: *evaluation, evaluation capacity building, higher education evaluation capacity, mixed methods evaluation, mixed methods integration*

Résumé : *Des capacités organisationnelles en évaluation limitées, des dynamiques de pouvoir et des contraintes en matière de ressources agissent comme des obstacles organisationnels qui entravent les évaluations de programmes de formation post-secondaires. Les capacités organistionnelles en évaluation soutiennent les activités d'évaluation et minimisent l'impact de ces obstacles. En intégrant une combinaison synergique de méthodes qualitatives et quantitatives à une initiative d'évaluation et de renforcement des capacités en évaluation (RCÉ), nous avons tenté de surmonter ces obstacles organisationnels. Dans la présente note sur la pratique, nous illustrons la façon dont les conceptions de MM catalysent la pensée évaluative qui promeut l'évaluation et soutient les efforts de RCÉ. Notre utilisation et notre intégration des stratégies de gestion de l'information en vue de renforcer les capacités en évaluation et d'intégrer l'évaluation à la culture organisationnelle sous-tendent les initiatives de renforcement des capacités en évaluation dans le secteur postsecondaire.*

Mots clés : *évaluation, renforcement des capacités d'évaluation, capacité d'évaluation de l'enseignement supérieur, évaluation des méthodes mixtes, intégration des méthodes mixtes*

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Evaluations promote goal attainment, like higher productivity, improved programs and better outcomes, enhanced organizational learning and development, and fulfilment of the organizational vision (Preskill & Boyle, 2008; Shulha & Cousins, 1997; Wholey, 2012). Regrettably, concerns and/or misconceptions about evaluation, like being resource-intensive activities (Wholey, 2012) or labelling programs as good or bad (Posavac, 1994), limit evaluation use as an efficiency- and outcomes-enhancing strategy. Possibly, these misconceptions or concerns result from low awareness about "evaluation's *multiple contributions*" (Alkin & Taut, 2002, p. 10) or assumptions from those who may have limited "capacity to do and to use evaluation" (Cousins et al., 2008, p. 1). In our experiences in higher education, evaluations are not often considered as part of program planning but as end-of-program activities.

Evaluation capacity building (ECB) initiatives, "an intentional process to increase individual motivation, knowledge, and skills, and to enhance a group or organization's ability to conduct or use evaluation" (Labin et al., 2012, p. 308), promote evaluations as integral to program planning. To ensure the efficacy of ECB initiatives in the higher education environment, where evaluation is undervalued, there is need for a contextually sensitive strategy that allows gradual unpacking of the complexities within the context and the inherent power issues. A multi-phase MM design facilitates incremental unpacking and addressing of misconceptions that marginalize evaluation and its associated benefits. This practice note illustrates the usefulness of integrating an MM design into an evaluation and ECB initiative for managing complexities and building evaluation capacity. Thus, this work responds to the call for testing the significance of MM designs in addressing real-world problems (Nastasi et al., 2010) and reiterating the need for building capacity to use evaluation (Cousins et al., 2008).

COMPLEXITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Innovation and programming in higher education are complex and challenging because of the need to balance competing interests of faculty, staff, and students— key *internal* stakeholders—with *external* stakeholders or funders—government and private partners. Faculty need funding and infrastructure for teaching, research, and service commitments. Students require faculty and staff expertise coupled with institutional infrastructure to advance their learning goals and meet degree accumulation needs. Staff manage institutional resources to support the accomplishment of individual and institutional objectives. Funders influence higher education institutions by promoting certain areas of research or fields of study. These diverse interests sometimes converge into creativity and innovation or prompt conflict, resulting in inefficiencies. These competing or diverse interests are intricately tied to power that results from control over resources, information, expertise, and so on (Ancona et al., 2004). Moreover, power difference arising from institutional hierarchy is characteristic of most higher education institutions. Power has both positive and negative manifestations, that is, as a facilitator and/or a disruptor, respectively

(Veneklasen & Miller, 2002). Power influences evaluations (Alkin & Taut, 2002; Shulha & Cousins, 1997), and hence must be considered.

Evaluations, represented by evaluators with professional training, can generate evidence to facilitate decision making on resource allocation that leads to effective programs and outcomes, optimum resource utilization, increased organizational learning and development, and accomplishment of organizational objectives (Preskill & Boyle, 2008; Shulha & Cousins, 1997; Wholey, 2012). Yet evaluation strategies, despite their usefulness, await assimilation into higher education assessment (Walser, 2015), which indicates a lack of capacity and/or desire to leverage evaluation findings (Cousins et al., 2008). The call for future research on the usefulness of evaluation in "colleges of education, nonacademic units on campus, and university-wide assessment and evaluation work" (Walser, 2015, p. 74) indicates the need for evaluation capacity building in higher education. Our experiences encompassing teaching, learning, higher education administration, and program design and implementation echo this need. Resource constraints, power issues, and limited evaluation capacity trigger complexities that result in organizational and attitudinal barriers that thwart evaluations in the higher education context.

Given the usefulness of ECB in promoting appreciation for evaluation and enhancing evaluation capacity (Labin et al., 2012; Preskill & Boyle, 2008), we leveraged an academic innovation initiative to explore ECB in higher education.

HOW THE COMPLEXITIES MANIFESTED IN THE STUDY CONTEXT

Study context

The Academic Innovation Accelerator (hereafter referred to as the accelerator) was an initiative for catalyzing innovations in teaching and learning in a public research university. Conceptualized along the lines of a business incubator, the accelerator provided expert support to help faculty and staff articulate, develop, and operationalize innovative ideas into sustainable endeavours. Between 2016 to 2019, the accelerator supported 20 projects via funding, project management, communication, information and instructional technology, and research and evaluation resources. The accelerator projects represented multidisciplinary, collaborative, and experientially enriching platforms for teaching and learning. The projects ranged from rethinking academic and co-curricular credentialing systems to building an outdoor environmental laboratory.

While educational research and evaluation expertise was integral to the accelerator, this resource was limited. For this study, limited evaluation capacity includes limited availability of evaluation expertise, an organizational sub-culture that undervalued evaluation, and an inclination toward anecdotal evidence as opposed to systematic inquiry for ascertaining program outcomes. Interconnected and mutually reinforcing, these factors created structural inertia that inhibited evaluation and ECB efforts in the study site.

Emergence of the need for evaluation capacity building

The accelerator project lead wanted to enlist a full-time internal evaluator to guide and support implementation of the project and complete a summative evaluation of the accelerator initiative. The first impact of the complexities—the combined effects of limited evaluation capacity, power dynamics, and resource constraints—resulted in a year's delay in formalizing evaluation support for the accelerator. In August 2017, an improvised evaluation team (internal evaluation team) comprising of a doctoral student, the accelerator project lead, and an associate professor of research methods and evaluation was formed to support accelerator projects and evaluate the initiative. The improvised evaluation teams' model of evaluation and ECB mirrored the Collaborative Evaluation Fellows Project (CEFP) in terms of building evaluation capacity while conducting an evaluation (Compton et al., 2002). The difference was that an evaluation expert led the CEFP, whereas a program evaluation PhD student led the accelerator's improvised evaluation team. Periodic guidance and support from the accelerator project lead and the faculty advisor compensated for the doctoral student's limitations in terms of evaluation experience, power, and access to resources. In mid-2019, following two years of on-the-job evaluation experience and completion of doctoral candidacy, the student was hired as a full-time evaluator to complete the summative evaluation of the accelerator.

Human resources committed to the formative (for the first accelerator project) and summative evaluation (of the accelerator) were limited throughout the evaluation. Hence, the improvised evaluation team attempted to engage the program staff in the evaluation process: a strategy for building evaluation capacity while conducting the evaluation. This two-pronged effort is described next.

Managing the complexities of the study context

A strategic approach was needed to demonstrate the value of the evaluation. Due to the complexities of the study context—power dynamics and limited evaluation capacity in particular—the improvised evaluation team adopted a slow yet steady strategy for engaging the project teams in the process of evaluation. Drawing from the process use (Patton, 2012) philosophy, the improvised evaluation team articulated its ECB strategy as Setting up for Evaluation (SFE) and combined evaluation and evaluation capacity building as one process (Mahato, 2020). Like evaluability assessment, setting up for evaluation reiterates the need for "making sure that the program treatment or model is clearly identifiable and logical; that outcomes are clear, specific, and evaluable; and that implementation strategies are reasonably and logically related to expected outcomes" (Patton, 2002, p. 164). In contexts where evaluation capacity is limited, power in terms of control over resources, information, and so on (Ancona et al., 2004) thwarts evaluation and ECB efforts. Hence, a modified strategy or setting up for evaluation is needed for getting the project, its staff, the program environment, and the evaluator ready for evaluation by identifying and managing power issues to facilitate co-creation of structures, systems, and processes that sustain knowledge and skills

acquired from the evaluation and ECB experience (Mahato, 2020). For successful outcomes, the evaluator/ECB leader must develop in-depth knowledge of the context to create experiential learning opportunities for those whose capacity is to be built.

A multi-phase MM design was used to pursue emerging questions and "[fit] the typical program evaluation and development approach well" because of its usefulness for the phases to build sequentially (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 101). The strengths of this phase-wise approach were that it allowed the evaluator time to understand the program context and design minimally disruptive strategies to engage program staff in the process of evaluation and help them self-assess the merit of evaluation inputs for their projects, and it allowed time for integration of different data types. Insights on how adopting a multi-phase MM design was the best approach to scaffold this ECB initiative, given the complexities and constraints of the study context, are presented next.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

MM scaffolding evaluation and ECB effort

A combination of sequential and equal status designs resulted in a five-stage synergistic model for navigating complexities and building evaluation capacity (Figure 1).
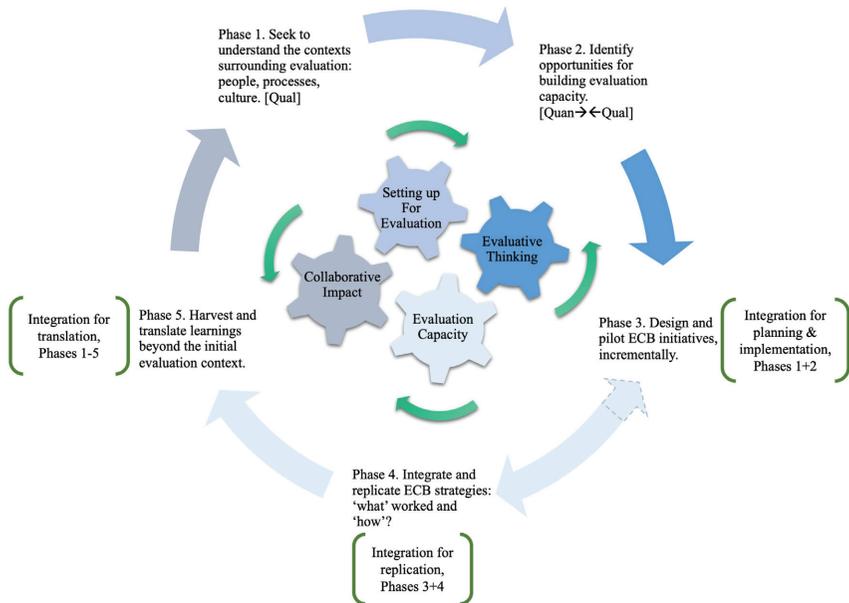

Figure 1. A multi-phase process of building evaluation capacity using MM designs

Phase 1: Seek to understand the contexts surrounding the evaluation

People, processes, and culture are key elements of the evaluation context (Alkin & Taut, 2002; Shulha & Cousins, 1997). As mentioned initially, competing interests and diverse perspectives of higher education stakeholders trigger complexities—for example, power dynamics—that, left unmanaged, inhibit evaluation. Hence, it was important to incorporate diverse perspectives necessary for effective evaluation designs (Poth, 2018) and identify gatekeepers of information, namely, team members who had access to and/or managed program-related information.

To illustrate, power issues combined with a disregard for evaluation led to lapses and/or delays in sharing program-related information with the evaluator. Knowing "the sophisticates"— those who value data and could be strong evaluation partners—as well as "the enthusiastic"—those who are eager to learn (Patton, 2012, pp. 16–17) is helpful. The caveat here is that the enthusiastic might not be invested in implementing the ideas, while the sophisticates might be rigid about their work plans (Patton, 2012). To bring these people on board, the evaluator must "be attentive to the different perspectives and values in their relevant constituencies" (Mertens, 2017, p. 17) and "meaningfully and respectfully [engage] with difference and diversity" (Greene, 2015, p. 750). Similarly, awareness of pockets of resistance or inaction, embodied by the "naysayers"— people negative by disposition—and "the complacent"—those happy with the status quo (Patton, 2012, p. 16), respectively, helps formulate the approach to evaluation and ECB.

Using qualitative strategies like observations and reflection exercises, insights into the project teams' interest in and/or capacity for evaluation were collected. These insights prepared the evaluator to navigate complexities that were likely to emerge within the evaluation context as the evaluation and ECB effort progressed.

Phase 2: Identify opportunities for building evaluation capacity

In this second phase, results from implementation of the first accelerator project were analyzed. Qualitative inputs from phase 1, combined with a study of program documents and observations of the project team's use of formative feedback, clarified program goals and strategies. Quantitative data on program participation and qualitative insights from phases 1 and 2 captured details on program vision, design, and implementation fidelity. Program design, development, and implementation were the goals of the first accelerator project. Hence, formative feedback on these aspects interested the project team members. This was an opportunity for the evaluator to generate data from diverse perspectives and sources to demonstrate the value of evaluation by highlighting areas for programmatic improvement and identifying opportunities for ECB activities. For example, formative results discussions with project team members revealed that terms like "logic model," or any statistical term were best avoided to make the evaluation environment non-threatening (Patton, 2012). Using "project plan" to denote a bare-bones logic model comprising objectives, activities, outputs, and associated timelines worked well.

A convergent design effectively met the need for formative feedback and helped identify potential ECB strategies for the next phase, given the resource (time) constraints. From the ECB perspective, combining quantitative program data (e.g., program ratings and participation numbers) with qualitative insights on the project team's use of program findings helped identify and categorize ECB opportunities based on ease of use, that is, favourability among the project team members. Using a participatory approach for designing surveys and developing the qualitative coding process, for example, were activities that project team members engaged with more readily compared to logic model or program theory articulation exercises.

Phase 3: Design and pilot ECB initiatives incrementally

Integration begins in phase 3, where the knowledge generated in the previous phases was assimilated into project planning and implementation. With full-time evaluation support starting in 2019, the ECB effort was now expanded to encompass other accelerator projects. The qualitative strands in phases 1 and 2 enriched understanding of the context and helped the improvised evaluation team identify pockets of power in this complex evaluation landscape. The evaluator's long-term interaction with the accelerator project team members had nurtured trusting relationships that facilitated the evaluation process. Several pockets of positive power (VeneKlasen & Miller, 2002)—that is, faculty and staff who were interested in program improvement feedback and demonstrated proclivity for evaluative thinking (Patton, 2012)—stimulated the evaluation and ECB efforts. Phase 1 and 2 findings helped design experiential learning activities like designing surveys, coding qualitative data, developing program logic models and/or theories of change, among others. These activities became common vehicles for demonstrating evaluation value as the evaluator expanded evaluation support to additional accelerator projects.

Phase 4: Integrate and replicate ECB strategies

Insights on engaging project teams in the process of evaluation explicated from phases 1 through 3 were integrated into ECB activities for other accelerator projects. Such replication of "what worked" and "how" generated additional insights that corroborated or questioned the effectiveness of each strategy. Replication of ECB strategies enhanced the evaluator's knowledge of how to engage project teams in the process of evaluation. Consequently, improved insights into organizational and attitudinal factors that influenced the effectiveness of ECB activities, and by extension the evaluation itself, resulted. For example, logic model development exercises worked better for some project teams compared to others. Some project leads struggled with and/or avoided discussions on logical links between resources, activities, outputs, and outcomes.

Unless ideas residing in the minds of project leads are translated into logically connected phases or diagrams, there remains scope for misinterpretation of project goals, ultimately leading to chaotic implementation and poor-quality

evaluation (Bickman, 1979)—an observation confirmed via our replication of the logic model development exercises.

Phase 5: Harvest and translate learnings beyond the initial evaluation context

This final integration and translation phase highlights the possibility of generating institutional knowledge and facilitating organizational learning via a phase-wise diffusion of evaluation value. Updates on milestones achieved by some accelerator projects catalyzed other project teams to reach out and collaborate. Knowledge transmitters—project staff who incorporated insights from the evaluation and ECB exercises in their work and shared their learning with peers—emerged. Faculty members, not part of the accelerator program, reached out for research and evaluation guidance.

Unfortunately, the pandemic affected followup on some of the ECB initiatives—the logic model development exercises, for example. However, the multi-phase MM process of building evaluation capacity had generated adequate data to complete the summative evaluation report. Recommendations to improve future programming were shared in the final report submitted to the research office (the funder for the accelerator) in June 2020. At the institutional level, it was expected that the research office would use insights generated from the accelerator evaluation for future programming.

According to a recent update, "the Accelerator is in early stages of another iteration, and the insights from this effort at ECB will be incorporated to the extent possible and appropriate given the details of the new design" (senior leadership member, personal communication, April 13, 2021).

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The key takeaway from this practice note is that multi-phase MM designs facilitate "more equitable power relationships between evaluators and program practitioners leading to jointly negotiated decision making and meaning making" (Shulha & Cousins, 1997, p. 200). Illustrated in this practice note (Figure 1) is the progression of the evaluation and the ECB initiative that could guide evaluation/ECB initiatives under similar conditions of limited resources, limited evaluation capacity, and power dynamics. It should be noted that the choice of a basic design within the advanced MM (multi-phase) design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) is a contextual consideration and is based on context, program goals, and resources available. Beginning with the initial phase of understanding the complexities of the context, that is, limitations in terms of resources, evaluation capacity, and power disparities, helped in contextualizing the level of evaluation capacity in the study context. Phase 2 revealed opportunities for ECB, while phases 3–5 (integration phases) allowed confirmation through replication: ECB strategies that could promote evaluation as an important component of program planning and infuse evaluation into the organization's culture. This systematic, yet organically evolving

process of inculcating value for evaluation would not be possible without the MM scaffold, particularly the multi-phase design.

This articulation of a multi-phase MM design demonstrates how the integration of qualitative and quantitative methods strengthened the improvised evaluation team's ECB efforts. The study illustrates a five-phase interactive and iterative process (Poth, 2018) that includes basic designs embedded within the broader multi-phase strategy of harvesting evaluation insights for reinvestment as organizational learning and capacity-building efforts. Depending on the type of evaluation, its scope, context, and existing/available data, projects could take any combination of basic designs—convergent or sequential—integrated into an advanced design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Intricate links between the complexities—power issues, resource constraints and limited evaluation capacity—necessitated the use of an MM approach for the accelerator evaluation, as a logical connection between resources, activities, and outputs was necessary to dispel evaluation myths. Our use of a multi-phase MM strategy sought to raise questions like "what," "so what," and "now what?" (Patton, 2012, p. 13), leading to several entry points for evaluation.

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