



Discovering Process Use

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Trying to figure out what's really going on is, of course, a core function of evaluation. Part of such reality testing at a conference includes sorting out what our profession has become and is becoming, what our core disciplines are, and what issues deserve our attention. I have spent a good part of my evaluation career reflecting on these concerns, particularly from the point of view of use; for example, how to work with intended users to achieve intended uses, and how to distinguish the general community of stakeholders from primary users so as to work with them. In all of that work, and indeed through the first two editions of *Utilization-Focused Evaluation* (a period spanning 20 years), I have been engaging in evaluations with a focus on enhancing utility, both the amount and quality of use. However, when I went to prepare the third edition of the book (Patton, 1997), and was trying to sort out what had happened in the field in the 10 years since the last edition, it occurred to me that I had missed something.

I was struck by something which my own myopia had not allowed me to see before. When I have followed up my own evaluations over the years, I have asked intended users about actual use. What I would typically hear was something like: 'Yes, the findings were helpful in this way and that, and here's what we did with them'. If there had been recommendations, I would ask what subsequent actions, if any, followed. But, beyond the focus on findings and recommendations, what they almost inevitably added was something to the effect that 'it wasn't really the findings that were so important in the end, it was going through the process'. Consequently, I would reply: 'That's nice. I'm glad you appreciated the process, but what did you really do with the findings?'. In reflecting on these interactions, I came to realize that the entire field has narrowly defined use as 'use of findings'. Thus, we have not had ways to conceptualize or talk about what happens to people and organizations as a result of being involved in an evaluation process: what I have come to call 'process use'.

The Impacts of Experiencing the Culture of Evaluation

I have defined process use as relating to and being indicated by individual changes in thinking and behaving that occur among those involved in evaluation as a result of the learning that occurs during the evaluation process. Changes in program or organizational procedures and culture may also be manifestations of process impacts. One way of thinking about process use is to recognize that evaluation constitutes a culture, of sorts. We, as evaluators, have our own values, our own ways of thinking, our own

language, our own hierarchy, and our own reward system. When we engage other people in the evaluation process, we are providing them with a cross-cultural experience. They often experience evaluators as imperialistic, that is, as imposing the evaluation culture on top of their own values and culture—or they may find the cross-cultural experience stimulating and friendly. In either case, and all the spaces in between, it is a cross-cultural interaction.

Those new to the evaluation culture may need help and facilitation in coming to view the experience as valuable. One of the ways I sometimes attempt to engage people in the value of evaluation is to suggest that they may reap personal and professional benefits from learning how to operate in an evaluation culture. Many funders are immersed in that culture. Knowing how to speak the language of evaluation and conceptualize programs logically are not inherent ‘goods’, but can be instrumentally good in helping people get the things they want, not least of all, to attract resources for their programs. They may also develop skills in reality-testing that have application in other areas of professional and even personal life.

This culture of evaluation, which we as evaluators take for granted in our own way of thinking, is quite alien to many of the people with whom we work at program levels. Examples of the values of evaluation include: clarity, specificity and focusing; being systematic and making assumptions explicit; operationalizing program concepts, ideas and goals; distinguishing inputs and processes from outcomes; valuing empirical evidence; and separating statements of fact from interpretations and judgements. These values constitute ways of thinking that are not natural to people and that are quite alien to many. When we take people through a process of evaluation—at least in any kind of stakeholder involvement or participatory process—they are in fact learning things about evaluation culture and often learning how to think in these ways. Recognizing this leads to the possibility of conceptualizing some different kinds of process uses, and that is what I now turn to.

Learning to Think Evaluatively

‘Process use’, as I have previously said, refers to using evaluation logic and processes to help people in programs and organizations to learn to think evaluatively. This is distinct from using the substantive findings in an evaluation report. It is equivalent to the difference between learning how to learn and learning substantive knowledge about something. Learning how to think evaluatively is learning how to learn. I think that facilitating learning about evaluation opens up new possibilities for positioning the field of evaluation professionally. It is a kind of process impact that organizations are coming to value because the capacity to engage in this kind of thinking has more enduring value than a delimited set of findings, especially for organizations interested in becoming what is now popularly called ‘learning organizations’. Findings have a very short ‘half-life’—to use a physical science metaphor. They deteriorate very quickly as the world changes rapidly. Specific findings typically have a small window of relevance. In contrast, learning to think and act evaluatively can have an ongoing impact. The experience of being involved in an evaluation then, for those stakeholders actually involved, can have a lasting impact on how they think, on their openness to

reality-testing, and on how they view the things they do. This is one kind of process use—learning how to think evaluatively.

Variations in Process Use

I have worked with a number of programs and organizations where the very process of taking people through goals clarification is a change-inducing experience for those involved. As a result, the program is changed. That is process use. Likewise, the process of designing an evaluation often raises questions that have an immediate impact on program implementation. These effects can be quite pronounced, as when the process of clarifying the program's logic model or theory-of-action leads to changes in delivery well before any evaluative data are ever collected.

Using the logic and questions of evaluation to facilitate communications among stakeholders is also process use. I was recently engaged in facilitating an evaluation process for a multi-cultural and multi-racial school/community program that had as one of its explicit purposes enhancing mutual understanding by gathering and reporting the different perspectives of the different racial and ethnic groups. These included Native American Indians, South-east Asians, African American, and Hispanic peoples, all of whom have settled in this inner city community in Minnesota. The evaluation includes an explicit process use goal of supporting and deepening communications between and among these different cultures. Another explicit process use is capturing the school experiences of community people who live in poverty as a mechanism for communicating their perspectives to school board directors who make decisions about schools, and to white, wealthy businessmen, who sit on the boards of the funding agencies that support these projects. Quite apart from the findings, it was the process of creating bridges of understanding that characterizes this example of process use. The evaluation process was used to help these different groups understand each other and to open up communications that had previously been closed for lack of a mechanism to bridge socio-economic and cultural gaps. Evaluation provided that bridging mechanism. Involving stakeholders from different perspectives and value bases in evaluation becomes an intervention, for good or bad. I am not suggesting that process use is inherently positive. Just as findings can be both used and misused, processes can be both used and abused. But, properly and skilfully facilitated, enhanced communications and shared understandings can emerge through evaluation processes because it is the nature of evaluation to make values explicit. Consider, for example, the current outcomes mania around the world, and particularly in the US, in which performance indicators have become a major focus of accountability initiatives. Finding performance measures is often treated as a largely technical matter. But performance measures and outcome-orientated goals are also expressions of values. A good example (with apologies for the ethnocentrism of a story from American colonial history) may help illustrate these process use connections between values clarification and outcomes identification. I quote from a letter that the Iroquois group of Native Americans wrote to the fathers of Virginia in 1774 before the American Revolution, in response to an invitation to have some of the young men from the tribe come to Virginia to be properly educated the Iroquois responded thus:

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Greetings, We know that you highly esteem the kind of learning taught in your colleges and that the maintenance of our young men while with you would be very expensive to you. We are convinced therefore that you mean to do us good by your proposal and we thank you heartily. But, you who are wise must know that different nations have different conceptions of things and you will not therefore take it amiss if our ideas of this kind of education happen not to be the same as yours. We have had some experience of it. Several of our young people were formerly brought up in the colleges of Northern Provinces; they were instructed in all of your sciences, but when they came back to us, they were bad runners, ignorant of every means of living in the woods, unable to bear either cold or hunger, knew neither how to build a cabin, take a deer, nor kill an enemy, spoke our language imperfectly, were therefore neither fit for hunters, warriors nor counsellors, indeed they were totally good for nothing. We are, however, not the less obliged by your kind offer, though we decline accepting it, and to show our grateful sense of it, should the gentlemen of Virginia care to send a dozen of their sons to us, we would take care of their education, instruct them in all that we know, and make men of them.

Values are the foundations of goals. By providing a mechanism and process for clarifying values and goals, evaluation has an impact even before data are collected.

Qualitative Insights

Let me explain how some of this thinking emerged out of my work in qualitative methods. A thoughtful, probing in-depth interview constitutes an intervention with people. Consider the potential impact on the person being interviewed of engaging in two to three hours of reflection stimulated by ever-deepening questions. Whether I'm interviewing a person in a community, a student, a professional, a teacher, or a senior manager—when I take them through the process of thinking about how they got from there to here, what's influenced them, what's affected their thinking, and where they see themselves trying to go in the future—they often report feeling changed in some way. It is common for them to say at some point in the interview: 'You know, you're making me think about some things that I haven't put together before'. And they often continue: 'When this interview is over I'm going to go do this or that'. They resolve to talk to somebody about some matter of importance or to put back at the top of their agenda something they've let slide. 'Answering your questions has reminded me of some commitments I've made that I haven't been following through on', they will say.

Perhaps a concrete example will illuminate my point. In the mid-1980s, northern Minnesota experienced a farm crisis as a result of global changes in agriculture. That area had many small family farms, dairy farms, with 30–40 head of cattle; 50–100 acre farms that were threatened by increased global competition and the industrialization of agriculture. The University of Minnesota Agricultural Extension Service wanted to develop programs to help family farmers, especially those experiencing distress: high rates of alcoholism, suicide, family violence, youth leaving the rural areas, and so on. We put together an interdisciplinary team of people to go out and conduct farm family interviews. We carried out the interviews in male–female pairs and interviewed husbands and wives in the farm kitchen. The way in which interviews comprise an intervention struck me dramatically in one of these interviews. On a very modest,

slightly run-down farm, we interviewed an elderly couple in their late-fifties. The children had left the farm and, contrary to the normal cultural pattern, when we asked the interview questions, it was the husband who answered most of them. He spoke eloquently about what it was like to live on the farm, about being close to nature, about owning his own piece of land, working the land, touching the dirt, and living on the very place where his parents and grandparents had settled from Europe. The whole time he was talking his wife was rolling her eyes, sighing deep sighs, and shaking her head, but not saying anything. Finally, about 20 minutes into the interview I asked, 'What would you like to have happen to the farm in the future?'. Before he could respond, she said 'Sell the damn thing!'. So, I said, in my best interviewer style, 'Would you care to say more about that?'. Well she did have one or two more things to say. It transpired that she was working the life that he was living. He had a day job in town, at the local granary. She was the one who got up at 4.00 am and milked the cows; despite her arthritis, she was the one who drove the tractor and lifted bales of hay. The children had left the farm and she just wanted to retire and do her crafts, but this was an old Norwegian couple who never talked to each other about such things. They had been married nearly 35 years and had never had a conversation with each other about her needs and wants. We came in from the University, asked a few open-ended questions aimed at needs-assessment, ripped the scabs off their marriage, let it bleed a little bit, and then left. Somehow, that felt like an intervention. We hadn't just been involved in some kind of neutral data collection. They were going to have to cope with what had been said during this interview. As this example illustrates, experiencing the process of evaluation can be potentially either positive or negative for those involved.

Evaluation as an Intervention

Let me turn now to another kind of process use: evaluation as an intentional intervention in support of program outcomes. This use of evaluation is controversial because it challenges the research principle that the measurement of something should be independent of the thing measured. Of course, researchers have long observed that measuring a phenomenon can affect the phenomenon. The classic example is the way that taking a pre-test can affect performance on a post-test. Viewing evaluation as an intervention turns the table on this classic threat to validity and looks at how the collection of data can be built into program processes in ways that enhance program outcomes. This can make evaluation more cost beneficial to a significant extent. For example, an evaluation interview or survey that asks about various objectives of a program can effect awareness of what the objectives or intended outcomes of the program are. In that sense, the evaluation is an intervention in that it can reinforce what the program is trying to do.

I had this kind of experience 20 years ago but didn't recognize what it was at the time. I didn't have the language to recognize or talk about it. I was working with a residential chemical dependency program. The staff and funders wanted to do some follow-up evaluation to establish post-program sobriety rates at six months, a year and two years after treatment. They also followed up with significant others. The instrument was derived from and based on the program intervention that patients had experienced during

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residency. In developing this instrument, I worked with staff and some program participants. At one point, we were discussing the sample sizes that would be needed depending on what subgroups they wanted to generalize about. I was explaining that we could get by with relatively small and inexpensive sample sizes if they were carefully followed up. One therapist suddenly insisted: 'I want everybody to get this survey'. I proceeded to explain how sampling could be done credibly, with great validity. She replied: 'I'm not worried about the validity of the data from a sample. I want everybody to get the survey because it will remind them of what they experienced during this program and I want them to have an opportunity, if they have not maintained sobriety, to call us and get additional help. I want every single person who experiences the program to get the benefit of the follow-up evaluation'. She was conceptualizing follow-up evaluation data as an intervention—an opportunity to remind people of their experience and, hopefully, stimulate them to do a self-assessment of their chemical use and sobriety. After considerable discussion, we adopted a census approach for that reason. As she suspected, a substantial proportion of those surveyed returned for more treatment in conjunction with the evaluation follow-up process. The evaluation follow-up has become a follow-on reinforcement and intervention built into the program.

Another example comes from a program in Ohio for young drug-addicted teenage women who are pregnant. It's a small, residential program with 10–12 young women at a time. The desired outcome is for them to have 'clean babies', that is, babies who are not born drug addicted. The first thing a young woman experiences when she enters that program is a peer who has already delivered her baby. She takes the new resident into the living room where on the wall hangs a chart with a bunch of 'X's on it. She is told that each 'X' represents a baby that was born to a resident. The greens are 'clean' baby births, babies who are born without any drugs in their system, and the reds are 'dirty baby births', for babies that were born on drugs. On the far left, there were two or three reds followed by 87 straight greens. The new resident is told: 'We've had 87 clean baby births. Don't screw up our record'.

Every young woman in that program knew what the desired outcome was. Data collection was used as a way to increase peer pressure to accomplish the outcomes of the program. When a young woman gave birth she was coaxed by two peer coaches. Following the birth, after the new mother has been properly seen to, the peer coaches return to the residence where all the other young women gather around and watch as they mark on the chart whether it was a 'clean' baby or a 'dirty' baby birth. Virtually all of these young women were poor school achievers and early school leavers, but they knew what these data meant. Previously, these data were simply aggregated at the hospital quarterly and sent back to the program on an annual basis for reporting and accountability purposes. Now data collection and reporting have become part of the program intervention. These are examples, and there are many others, where the very act of evaluation has impact, where the evaluation process itself gets used.

What Gets Measured Gets Done

A different kind of process use is using the discipline of evaluation as a mechanism for helping to keep a program or organization 'on track' by maintaining attention to

priorities, often under the banner of accountability. The mantra of performance measurement—‘What gets measured gets done’—encapsulates one aspect of evaluation’s process impact. What we choose to measure has an impact on how people behave. If staff or programs, for example, get rewarded (or punished) for those things that are measured, then those things take on added importance. This kind of focusing effect of evaluation can, as I have previously noted, be used for good or ill. Measuring the wrong thing, measuring it inappropriately, or using what is measured inappropriately increases the likelihood that the ‘wrong’ thing will get done. It is worth focusing briefly on the potential downside of using evaluation as a direct intervention.

Goal displacement is one common concern (and result) of accountability-orientated performance measurement. There is currently a major debate in the US about whether to imitate a number of European countries and have mandated, uniform national achievement tests for students. One concern is that having a national test will increase federal control in the largely decentralized US educational system as national standards come to shape the local curriculum, that is, ‘what gets measured gets done’. For others, shaping the local curriculum is precisely the point. Both sides in the debate see evaluation as having a powerful impact by focusing attention on what can be and is ‘measurable’, and shaping programs accordingly.

When the stakes are very high for those involved, the accountability function of evaluation can lead to distortion of key indicators: what gets measured gets corrupted. I recently had occasion, on behalf of SAGE Publications, to review some of the early papers that Donald T. Campbell wrote 25 years ago, when he was writing about ‘The Experimenting Society’. This was an extraordinary group of papers, prescient about virtually all the issues discussed during this conference. One paper that particularly attracted my attention—he was writing in the early 1970s—concerned whether we could actually realize the vision of an experimenting society in pluralistic democracies. Outcomes would get so politicized and so quickly corrupted, Campbell warned, that they would do more harm than good. When the stakes get too high and people’s jobs and livelihoods are dependent on outcome measurement, they will produce those measured outcomes one way or the other as a matter of survival.

In *Utilization-Focused Evaluation*, I relate the story of a school system in the US that hired a businessman as superintendent to come in and shape up the schools. He developed a performance measurement system in which those teachers whose students performed at the bottom of standardized achievement tests each year would be fired. The teachers responded to that performance measurement very rationally. They not only started teaching the students the test, some started taking the test for the students or falsifying test results. The stakes had become very high. As their livelihoods became dependent on attaining certain outcomes, they could not risk negative results, so they did what they needed to do to assure positive results. The measurement system and curriculum became corrupted.

One such story that Donald Campbell told took place during the Vietnam War. During the early years of US involvement in Vietnam, the official estimates of enemy casualties put out by both the South Vietnamese and US military were unverifiable and unbelievably large. The US Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, initiated an effort to substitute a more conservative and verifiable form of reporting, even if it

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underestimated total enemy casualties. Thus, the ‘body count’ was born, a ‘performance measurement’ system that enumerated only those bodies left by the enemy on the battlefield. These data were used to determine the overall progress of the war as well as for evaluating the effectiveness of specific battalions and platoons. A new military goal was thus created. Rather than the traditional goal of controlling territory, the new goal was increasing the number of dead bodies. Pressure to ‘score well’ in this regard was passed down from senior officers to field commanders. However, in guerrilla warfare, it is not always clear how to identify ‘enemy soldiers’. Thus, when Lieutenant Calley and his troops massacred civilian women and children in the village of My Lai on 16 March 1968, he was merely engaged in getting bodies to count for his weekly effectiveness report. His goals, and therefore his actions, were corrupted by the focus on a single quantitative indicator, leading both to a reduction in the validity of that indicator for its original military purposes and corruption of his judgement as an officer and leader.

Beyond Neutrality

Process use, then, can be a positive influence, helping people attain the desired outcomes of programs. It can reinforce interventions, increase clarity about the linkage between values and goals, stimulate logical analysis, and contribute to increased effectiveness simply by posing questions the answers to which heighten intentionality. The downside is that when the stakes get too high and the performance indicators too narrow, the evaluation process is subject to corruption and can have a corrupting influence on the very interventions it is designed to monitor and improve.

All of this means that ours is not a neutral activity or profession. Precisely because of the potential power of process use—power to influence things for either good or ill—we have to worry about the admonition to ‘first do no harm’. We must recognize that our work is not benign. In the early days, we conceptualized the utilization issue as primarily a continuum from use to non-use. We have become more sensitive to misuse and abuse, gradually acknowledging both the great good that can come of thoughtful, appropriate evaluation processes as well as the great harm that can be done to programs and people when evaluation is ill-used.

Being Used

I close with a brief comment on the conference theme—‘Evaluation: Being Useful or Being Used’. Despite its implicit negative connotation, I do not take umbrage at the notion of being used. Process use in its positive sense is about being used—appropriately used. I invite the primary intended users with whom I work to view me as a resource, in effect, to use whatever professional knowledge and skills I have to offer. My credibility is used; my reputation is used; my knowledge and skills are used. Thus, I do not worry about being used. I want to be used. I’ve dedicated my professional life to being used. However, I do not want to be misused or abused, and I do not want to contribute to the misuse and abuse of others. The power of process use and the power of the notion that ‘what gets measured gets done’ challenge us to think about our field well beyond its technical and methodological elements, important as those are. There

are deep-seated moral and political dimensions to our actions that have consequences for people and programs. Both the positives and negatives of process use invite us to look carefully and thoughtfully at the impacts of engaging in this activity called 'evaluation', quite apart from what findings themselves may yield. What we do in the process of generating those findings has its own impacts.

Reference

Patton, M. Q. (1997) *Utilization-Focused Evaluation: The New Century Text*, 3rd edn. London: Sage.