

Evaluation: Under Which Conditions?

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Conferences like the VSA conference are a forum for a growing number of exchanges and the emergence of a "grey" literature; we can see that evaluation is becoming increasingly important in museology, and that achievements are marked by varying degrees of inventiveness, innovation, and methodological rigor. In short, the know-how is being gradually accumulated. However, we must admit that the legitimacy of this recent practice is largely determined by how the data are used, which brings us to the two subjects of our presentation: the involvement of the client, and the ethical conduct of the evaluator. These issues are rarely discussed.

Our presentation deals precisely with the whole evaluation process, from how the initial request is formulated, to the support provided to the consultant, to how the results are distributed (see Note 1). We start with the assumption that the results will be useful and used insofar as the need for information is clearly established by the exhibit team, shared with the consultant, and accepted by both parties.

Parks Canada, Québec Region, has just introduced a communications evaluation program which covers live communication programs (group and educational activities) as well as exhibitions. Parks Canada has had the chance to initiate front-end, formative, and summative evaluation projects. Occasionally, we have to seek input from outside experts. This paper deals with the client's role and the evaluator's conduct: addressing a request, choosing a consultant, giving support, and applying results.

Consultation Request

When input from an evaluator is needed, a request for services or work instructions must be prepared. A proper request should include these different aspects (Bolduc, 1993) (see Note 2).

Determining the Context or Philosophy of the Evaluation

The evaluator needs to know about the various aspects that could influence how an evaluation is carried out. The evaluator should know the context in which the evaluation will be conducted before undertaking any action whatsoever (service proposal or acceptance of a mandate). Since it can be tedious for a client to describe the situation in writing, a preliminary meeting before preparing the proposal is recommended (information session, individual meeting or telephone conversation).

The first thing that should be discussed is the need for an evaluation (what and why): What information are we looking for? What will the information be used for and who will use it? Why evaluate this rather than that? The answers to these questions (explicit and implicit) are confidential and permit:

- 1) the creation of an atmosphere of mutual trust;
- 2) the process to be planned;
- 3) any eventual problems or misunderstandings to be averted.

In other words, this process involves identifying the conditions in which the evaluation will be conducted. For example, the evaluator needs to know:

- the institution's corporate identity and culture (history, mission, orientations, organizational chart, etc);
- the activities and services offered;
- the economic, social, and cultural context;
- the place and role of the evaluation within the institution;
- the results of earlier evaluations.

Determining the Psychological Context of the Evaluation

Some aspects that cannot be ignored, and which help an evaluation progress smoothly are:

- 1) What is the evaluator's role before, during, and after the evaluation?
- 2) What professional services and expertise can the evaluator offer?
- 3) To whom is the evaluator accountable and who are the decision-makers (clients)?
- 4) Who are the players involved: target clientele, firm(s) or exhibit producer(s), sponsor(s), management, etc?
- 5) What agreements need to be made between the parties for the evaluation?
- 6) What kind of report will the evaluator have to produce (for example, preliminary, technical, final)?
- 7) How will the results be used and to whom will they be communicated?

Alt and Lewis (1982) accurately applied the attraction-repulsion relationship to distributing results: the client wants to know what visitors think of the activities and services offered, but is at the same time afraid to

find out because this information could be perceived and used in different ways. No matter the approach, an evaluation is, as they say, "putting people at risk." It may be perceived as:

- A trial— The information thus produced may be used to demonstrate that the results have little or no relation to the goals being pursued, which calls the design process into question;
- Revenge— The information may confirm certain opinions or prejudices held by someone else in the organization;
- Conformity— The evaluation is imposed by an influential person in the organization and the information is then perceived as the result of a "command";
- A touchy issue— The evaluation could become a political issue within the organization and the information produced could be used as arguments to settle internal conflicts (position, budget allocation, etc).

These are mainly associated with summative evaluation, so Parks Canada emphasized formative evaluation in order to avoid these effects as much as possible. Thus, an evaluation conducted during the design stage allows the necessary adjustments to be made en route before the final product is delivered. Also, the evaluator participates in the decision-making and can no longer hide behind his or her measuring methods and so-called objectivity.

Determining the Technical Context of an Evaluation

The budget and deadlines—

It is better if the resources available are specified so that the evaluator has some guidelines and can come up with a realistic and efficient process that meets the stated needs. In view of all the possible techniques, analyzing the constraints is often what enables the development of a relevant, suitable methodological process. If the constraints are not made known, the proposal may need a major overhaul later on.

The resources available—

It is also important to know what human and material resources are available. Can the staff at the site or in the park be counted on for gathering data? Will the evaluator or the institution prepare the material? Who is available when (for example, for coordinating the process)? And so forth.

Choosing a Consultant: Stating One's Ethical Approach

Besides proficiency in methodology, an evaluation also involves strategic choices which are determined by the organization's culture, the evaluator's way of thinking, and the paradigms already existing in

museology (planned use of the information produced, timetable and people involved, the exhibition's definition of performance, etc). That is why it is becoming increasingly important to set a frame of reference (system of values) that governs practice.

By "ethical" we mean a way of thinking, a regard for judgment, a consideration of conduct (whether foreseeable or not). The relationship between the evaluator and his or her client influences the evaluator's practice. Four ethical models govern these relationships either consciously or unconsciously.

The Priest or Magician

In this model, evaluators feel that their competence, secret knowledge and magic skills give them almost absolute and unquestionable power. As a result, clients are kept in naive, irremediable ignorance about the evaluation, thereby ensuring that they remain in a submissive position.

The Father Figure

The well-known television series "Father Knows Best" is an example of this model. The title reflects the type of relationship that long dominated and still exists in many cases. One person's competence and great generosity induces others to do what that person wishes in order to achieve some good. Such people must be obeyed because their moral authority overrides the fact that they may be overstepping their professional competence.

The Engineer or Expert

This model represents another kind of relationship, and has two major characteristics. An engineer's field of expertise includes knowledge that he or she knows how to apply with the knowledge of others, in order to carry out a particular project. In addition, an engineer knows how to calculate the cost/benefit ratios for the decisions and choices that must be made to complete the project. One of the consequences of scientific and technological development is that professionals have all become engineers to some degree. This model may also leave clients on the sidelines, giving them a more or less passive role.

The Partner

In this model, the evaluator or consultant puts the emphasis on the equality of the parties and sharing responsibilities. In the social sciences, action research is a feature of a certain methodological approach that puts the emphasis on introducing and sharing a "mutual understanding" in order to make everyone independent in the process. However, equality doesn't mean identity. Independence does not result in the rejection of help, and mastering the process does not involve denying the evaluator's contribution. In this

model everyone is and remains in charge of his or her own life. The evaluator is thus invited to account for his or her decisions and actions.

It goes without saying each model has significant issues (effects). As a result, the rules of conduct for each of the four models must be completely different while still remaining ethical.

Sometimes the philosophical, psychological or technical contexts lead the evaluator to choose one model over another, or to move from one model to another. For example, an organization that cannot allocate very much of its time to the evaluator or must change the authority in charge (client's representative) might prefer the engineer-expert relationship with the evaluator taking charge, limiting the time wasted, etc. It is possible to determine the evaluator's preferred intervention model by examining the evaluator's past mandates or current proposal, in order to choose or encourage the most suitable method.

Giving Support: Supervision or Participation

Parks Canada emphasizes formative evaluation. At this point the exhibit team's interest in the process has to be aroused. This task will be all the easier if team members are not under the impression that the evaluation process is intended to judge their work. Because no matter what one does or how the evaluation is conducted, the final report always says something about the designers.

Consequently, it is important to have an approach that protects individuals and reputations. It is essential to establish an atmosphere of trust, and to encourage the development of an open, attentive attitude. Because as far as the designers are concerned, it is not so much the knowledge of the techniques and rigor of the methodological process that is important (the evaluator's business in fact), but the reflection and questioning that go into the process and the beneficial effects that result from it. In addition, the more people participate when the study is being conducted, the better they accept the results, and, ultimately, put them back into production. But every ideal situation has its drawbacks: deadlines and the work schedule are sometimes disrupted.

From the consultant's point of view, support can take many forms, depending on the prevailing ethical attitude. When simple supervision is replaced with real participation, the consultant must adopt a partnership attitude, if that is not already his or her attitude, and show flexibility and humility. The evaluation proposal will be discussed and debated; every choice must be argued and justified.

Of course, this is not always a comfortable situation on a daily basis; we know that the literature does not provide any proven methodological standards, and that each evaluation is an original undertaking, meaning that it is custom designed and unique, like its subject. Yet, this attitude is effective in that the main parties concerned are directly involved, and it is

reassuring when results lead directly (and naturally) to action, because everyone knows how and why visitors were consulted or observed.

Finally, the consultant must maintain a firm balance between complicity and subservience. If the consultant knows how to encourage a partnership context, he or she must avoid flattering clients and trying to reassure them by playing down any unpleasant results. It is much easier to be frank and analytical if the context of the request has been clearly laid out.

Applying The Results: And Now What?

One of the more significant negative factors that affects the evaluation is the "applicability gap" (Rubenstein, 1988), or the extremely long delay that can exist between the time the data are gathered and the time a report is produced.

Feedback mechanisms must sometimes substitute for the preparation of reports; it is good to communicate the first observations orally, using compilations and written comments from the raw data, as soon as possible. There are three direct advantages to this: (1) users of the evaluation are informed rapidly and can already use it in their production processes, (2) they participate in the interpretation of the data, thereby ensuring their full participation until the evaluation is finished and (3) the evaluation puts less pressure on deadlines, which are usually already tight.

From the consultant's point of view, once again this has its advantages and disadvantages: it is better to take the time needed to present the results in due form and thus enhance the expertise of the report. Furthermore, seeking client input in analyzing and interpreting the data could be construed as lack of competence, shirking one's responsibility, or even laziness.

In fact, the greater the client participation, the greater the probability they will conclude that they did not really need an expert since they did everything themselves. We already mentioned that flexibility and humility are important qualities in an evaluator. But maybe a teacher's dedication is the greatest virtue.

Praise and acknowledgement may be part of the benefits, but it is much more comforting to know that one's efforts have been worthwhile: in fact, sharing results and having them accepted and applied will ensure that the evaluation makes a long-lasting impact and is less likely to end up on a shelf.

The Evaluation, Yes But Only If...

Evaluation results are fascinating. The models and trends that are revealed by the case studies stimulate reflection and in turn inspire action. Although the benefits of an evaluation are attractive, the conditions and costs of the operation should not be underestimated. We have tried to show that they play an important, if not essential role.

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Notes

1. The emergence of the evaluative practice, its gradual formalization, and results and benefits have already been dealt with extensively, notably in Volumes 1-5 of *Visitor Studies: Theory, Research, and Practice*.
2. This paper reproduces large extracts of a seminar prepared by Louise Boucher, *L'évaluation: Utile ou futile?*, and presented on the occasion of the Congrès de l'Association québécoise d'interprétation du patrimoine, on April 16, 1993.