

Coexistent model of evaluation

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Introduction

Evaluations are often required of programs that have multiple stakeholders. In these cases the instigators invariably wish to have the views and perspectives of the different stakeholders accommodated within the evaluation. Commonly these evaluations are called multiperspective. While interpretations of that term may vary, the general approach is that the different perspectives are considered, but they are *aggregated* so as to provide a whole picture of the program being reviewed. In adopting such a process, there is the potential that the views of certain stakeholders will be lost. One reason for that is the tendency to strive to understand all views from the standpoint of either the evaluator or the client who has commissioned the study.

To ensure that important perspectives are retained, a *coexistent* model of evaluation may be more appropriate. This model was developed by Dr Kate Roberts as part of her PhD thesis on evaluation, using the evaluation of the Landcare movement in Queensland as a case study. It does not strive to make the different perspectives understandable to one audience (e.g. the funder) and it incorporates procedural steps to ensure that an enforced consensus is not arrived at. It recognises that there can be several interpretations of the same data collected for the evaluation. The views of the stakeholders can coexist together even though they are different.

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| If the reader is not familiar with the Landcare movement see www.landcareaustralia.com.au for background information. |
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Advantages of the coexistent model

The advantages of this model are that it ensures that the different perspectives are not lost or minimised and it enables all views to be given appropriate weight. If there are any conflicting views about the program they are exposed and accounted for. For example, the beneficiaries may be experiencing great value but the funding administrators may find the program too costly.

In its purest form, the coexistent model allows the different stakeholders to collect and interpret their own data and this makes for a rich and varied picture of the program. Those interpretations may not be comprehensible to other stakeholders but that is acceptable under this model. The coexistent form is best suited to long term programs with multiple stakeholders who are culturally different. [The term “culture” as it is used here is not confined to race or ethnicity but more broadly to include attitudes or norms arising from the stakeholders’ socio economic group, organisation or occupation].

Multiperspective v coexistent: an example

The differences between the multiperspective and coexistent approach may be illustrated by a land use analogy. Multiperspective in terms of land use may be seen as multiple uses of the same piece of land. The land may be used simultaneously for farming, grazing, nature conservation and recreation. The singular purpose may be to make a living. The landholder may want to evaluate the success of the enterprise and the different uses will be examined. There would be different criteria to judge the success of the activities. The data collected would be interpreted by the landholder and it would make sense to that person. Some activities may be doing better than others but from the aggregation of the data, a picture of the land use, and the profit it produces, may be obtained.

Assume the same piece of land was used by three different groups: one as a resource (farming), another to tell the stories of the land (indigenous use) and the third to exploit the minerals (mining). It may return a good profit for the farming operation, be very significant for the indigenous group but be marginal for the miners. The same data (e.g. the soil tests and rocks and minerals) may be interpreted differently by the different users. The three interests may coexist side by side but each view the land differently. There may be no reason for these stakeholders to know very much about each other unless they need to negotiate at the point where they interact. An example might be access to the land or the use of internal roadways.

A multiperspective evaluation in this second situation is not likely to be appropriate. The owner of the land, or an external evaluator, would have great difficulty in interpreting the data in a way that gives meaning for each perspective. This can only be done by the different stakeholders. It would also be somewhat meaningless for the evaluation to aggregate the different perspectives into a whole.

Diversity

The central feature of the coexistent model is that it preserves diversity. So if diversity is important to a program then this approach is justified. In her research into the Landcare movement in Queensland, Kate Roberts found that diversity was important in that instance. For example, there was disagreement between the farmers and conservationists about the direction of Landcare and there was tension between the community and government members. One was more concerned with national or state public good (depending on whether it was a state or federal government) and the other between private and local good. It was this tension that kept the movement strong.

If each of these standpoints converged into a consensus view then the strength of the different perspectives would diminish and lose their integrity. Part of the success of Landcare was the views and arguments between the different stakeholders. Of course, the maintenance of these different perspectives was not stated as an objective of Landcare but their presence played an important role. If an evaluation only measured the state of the program against its objectives, then a much more limited (and less accurate) view of the program would emerge.

The fundamental starting point is to ascertain if the stakeholders really have differences that need to be preserved. If they do, then the coexistent model is important.

Methodology

Continuing the comparison between the multiperspective and the coexistent models, a short summary of a typical methodology for each is set out in the Table below. The coexistent form assumes that an external evaluator is carrying out a parallel evaluation for the client in the traditional way.

| Multiperspective | Coexistent |
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| 1. Identification of issues by client | 1. Identification of issues by client |
| 2. Identification of stakeholders | 2. Identification of stakeholders |
| 3. Identification of issues by stakeholders | 3. Identification of issues by stakeholders |
| 4. Development of evaluation questions in consultation with client | 4a. Development of evaluation questions in consultation with client |
| | 4b. Stakeholders develop their own evaluation questions |
| 5. Agreement on data collection methods with client. | 5a. Agreement on data collection methods with client. |
| | 5b. Stakeholders select their data collection methods |
| 6. Data collection by external evaluator | 6a. Data collection by external evaluator |
| | 6b. Data collected by stakeholders |
| 7. Analysis and interpretation of data by external evaluator | 7a. Analysis and interpretation of data by external evaluator |
| | 7b. Analysis and interpretation by stakeholders. |
| | 7c. Stakeholders negotiate interpretations where necessary. |
| 8. Report and recommendations to client | 8a. Report and recommendations to client on client's evaluation questions. |
| | 8b. No report or recommendations on stakeholder questions or data unless they ask for it. They analyse their own. |

It will be apparent that there are six major differences between the two types of evaluations:

1. The stakeholders develop their own evaluation questions (4b).
2. The stakeholders select data collection methods that suit them (5b).
3. The stakeholders collect their own data or negotiate with the evaluator to do it (6b). After the collection of all data, it is given to all stakeholders.
4. They interpret the results (7b).
5. Stakeholders negotiate interpretations of data (7c).
6. The external evaluator makes no recommendations on the data collected by the stakeholders and its interpretation by the stakeholders (8b).

In reality there will generally be an evaluator to help stakeholders with these tasks.

Before looking at those differences, it will be apparent from what has been said above, that step 2 (the identification of the stakeholders) is a crucial aspect of the methodology because at that stage an assessment needs to be made as to whether the diversity between the stakeholders is important **and** whether the maintenance of that diversity is important so as to call for a coexistent evaluation.

Difference between multiperspective and coexistent forms

1. Stakeholders develop their own evaluation questions

One important aspect of preserving diversity is to have a process where the stakeholders develop their own evaluation questions. This is an important prelude to the collection of the data. It was found with the Landcare study that each stakeholder wanted to know different things about that Program. The Landcare groups were primarily concerned to know what other Landcare groups were doing; the Commonwealth Government to measure against stated objectives; the State government had concerns about the administration of Landcare and whether their extension officers were able to service the movement at the local level.

In a multiperspective evaluation the inclination, even though stakeholders may be consulted, is to view the relevant questions from the standpoint of the client or group commissioning the study. This means that the client determines the questions that are asked of the stakeholder groups.

2. Stakeholders to select their own data collection methods

It may be that different stakeholders will have data collection preferences, as occurred with Landcare. The collection may need to be culturally and socially sensitive, and appropriate. There may be physical factors to take into account, such as distance or competing demands on potential respondents' time. For example, to involve Landcare group members in remote Queensland in focus groups was inappropriate because of the time it takes them to travel long distances. They preferred telephone interviews over written questionnaires. The remote location of respondents can even make telephone conversations with data collectors welcome. The extent to which stakeholders are involved here will depend to a large extent on the skill and knowledge of the group. Training by a facilitator may be required.

3. The stakeholders collect their own data

With assistance from a facilitator, the different stakeholders can collect data based around their own evaluation questions and collection methods. It may be that the stakeholders engage the evaluator to collect data for them or engage one of their own members. Either way, the stakeholders determine how the data are collected.

4. Stakeholders interpret the results

With the coexistent model, stakeholders carry out their own interpretations of the data. There is no single method of interpretation and no single evaluator. Facilitators

who assist the stakeholders need to be careful that their own values and training do not interfere with the interpretation process. At this stage of the process, the interpretations are carried out by each stakeholder without reference to other stakeholders to ensure that diversity is preserved.

5. Stakeholders negotiate interpretations of data

A joint meeting of stakeholders is held so the different interpretations of the data and the different views about the program can be aired, but only those parts that need interaction or negotiation. For example, government and community stakeholders may have different funding priorities that need to be resolved. Farmers and conservationists may need to negotiate what is an acceptable level of shared land use between agriculture and wilderness. Prior to this happening the results gathered and the interpretation of the data are circulated among other stakeholders.

At this meeting, interaction between stakeholders is encouraged and from that agreed solutions may be found to points of difference or interaction. Equally, where diversity does continue then it may be necessary to negotiate ways that the diversity can be maintained and how it can be used to enrich the program.

6. Recommendations

The meeting described in 5 above is substituted for the stage where an external evaluator would ordinarily make recommendations regarding the outcome of the evaluation.

A hybrid model

It is conceded that the coexistent model in its pure form may not always be suitable for an evaluation. It requires stakeholders that are motivated to carry out their own evaluation and it may be that the required level of training and administrative support is not always available. In this instance it may be possible to carry out a multiperspective evaluation with an external evaluator who will interpose some of the steps which are peculiar to the coexistent model.

In the first place, the evaluator will be conscious of the presence of diversity in the stakeholders and from that ensure that at least the first step described above is followed: the gathering of the stakeholders' own evaluation questions. Even though the stakeholders may not, in effect, carry out their own evaluation, the external evaluator can seek their opinions on data collection methods, perhaps use them to collect some data and gather their input on the interpretation of the results. Finally, the external evaluator could call a meeting of stakeholders to discuss the interpretation of the results and the negotiate how remaining points of difference are going to be managed.

The benefit of this approach is that all stakeholders should feel an increased sense of empowerment and they will know more about the perspectives of the other stakeholders. Any issues that may fracture or disrupt the program can be isolated and hopefully resolved.