National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement

Evaluation 101

Introduction to evaluation

With Sophie Duncan

00:00 Introduction

Evaluation is a critical part of developing high quality public engagement and in this short webinar we'll be looking at the key ways that you can develop a really effective evaluation approach for your work.

My name is Sophie Duncan and I work at the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement, and I am really passionate about the role of evaluation in informing what we do and in evidencing if and how it has value.

To start with I would like to say that evaluation is a friend of anyone who wants to do high quality public engagement, but it is a critical friend, and you will sometimes find out things through evaluation that may disappoint you or may make you have to think really really hard about how your activity is fit for purpose. However, evaluation helps you work out how to make your project fit for the purpose and fit for the participants.

Evaluation is part of planning a project and isn't something that you should be leaving till the end or to the point of intervention, so often at the point of intervention people think, 'oh, I haven't thought about evaluation' and they immediately want to evaluate the participants. It's much better to think about evaluation strategically. Think about where you use your resource what techniques you use to gather your data and really think hard about what you're trying to find out through your evaluation and what you're going to do with that evidence. And finally, it really helps you work through that iterative cycle that leads to quality engagement.

01:42 Four pillar approach

In order to think about the fundamentals for designing a really high-quality engagement plan, I'm going to draw on the NPC's four pillar approach, and we have a link to this resource on our website. The four-pillar approach starts with a foundation of leadership and commitment for evaluating well. It then has four pillars on which to build an effective evaluation approach, and I'm going to take each in turn.

The first pillar is to map your theory of change. And a theory of change is simply how you think change is going to happen: how the activities you're planning in your project are going to lead to the change that you're seeking. You can do a theory of change in lots of different ways, but today I'm just going to focus on one way of presenting a theory of change, a logic model.

02:26 Theory of change and logic models

At a very basic level a logic model just helps you spell out the different elements of your project, from the inputs – what you're putting in. So, that might be your time, it might be your partner's time, it might be resources, it might be funding. It also then gives you a chance to describe well what are you going to do: what are the activities that you're going to do as part of your project. And finally, what are you going to achieve through those activities: what kinds of outcomes will there be.

This next diagram is a slightly more complicated version or more detailed version of the basic logic model I showed in the previous slide. And there's a copy of this on our website.

Here you'll see that there's some additional categories. So first and foremost, what's the purpose of your activity? What's its main aim and who are the participants? And that might be the publics who are involved, the community organizations are involved, the partners that you are working with.

You will see that again we have inputs, what you're going to put in and the activities what you're going to do. But now we've created three columns – outputs, outcomes, and impacts. It's fair to say that the outputs are basically just that: what's come out of the project. You might have created a website; you might have created a resource; 50 people might have attended an event. On the whole you can quantify outputs relatively easily and also you can assess that data and we often call that monitoring data – data that you can just find out by looking at your project and what you've done. Outcomes and impacts are what's resulted as a result of your project, and we've chosen to split them into two just to help us think about the immediate outcomes or the immediate impacts of a project. So, what's been achieved at the point of intervention and then those longer-term impacts that perhaps happen over a longer period of time, and as a consequence may take a different approach to thinking about how you would measure.

You'll see also that we've got a box on assumptions, and these are the assumptions that you're making in developing your theory of change. And we make lots of assumptions about how the activities that we are designing are going to actually lead to the impacts that we hope for. And then there's factors and risks, things outside of your control that actually could impact your program. And finally, there's evaluation, but I'll be talking about that shortly.

Creating a model of your theory of change is a really good collaborative activity to do if you're working with a team or you're working in partnership. It helps you think collectively about the activities you choose to prioritize in order to lead to the kinds of outcomes and impacts that you care about, and it also helps you to check in with one another about the assumptions you have on the program.

05:29 The second pillar

The second pillar is to prioritize what you measure, and this is all about the purpose of the evaluation and why you're evaluating and who you're evaluating for. Prioritizing what you measure is a critical part of deciding your plan and sometimes because we leave it to too late in the process, we end up directing our evaluation effort at the wrong point in the program.

It's worth remembering that evaluation can be used at the beginning, throughout, and at the end of a program to address the evaluation questions that you have. Front-end evaluation helps you to gather insight and learning that can actually help you develop your project. Formative evaluation helps you as you go through the process to reflect on what's working well, what isn't working so well, and if and how the interventions you're designing or piloting are actually working. And finally summative evaluation helps you to look back on the program to see what worked, what learning you have, and perhaps some of the things that you might think about for future programs.

When thinking about what you want to know you may find this guide helpful. This guide is from Better Evaluation and they're looking at the kinds of areas that evaluation questions could explore. The first is descriptive questions. So, they are questions that help you think about what happened. And there are causal questions that look at what's contributed to the changes that have been observed and the role of your intervention or your program within that. There are process questions about whether the process could be considered a success and who was it a success for. And action questions that look at what we're learning from the program and what should be done to respond to the evaluation findings.

This slide is available on our website for you to find out more.

It's really important to consider those questions that you have for the evaluation, and those larger kind of evaluative questions. It's really helpful to do that with your collaborators and your partners to consider what's important to you to find out from your evaluation. And as a rule of thumb, around six main overarching kind of questions to explore is probably enough. And once you've got those questions you should map them onto the logic model because it will depend on where you do the evaluation to source the evidence required to answer those overarching questions. So, it might mean that you need to do a baseline before you start your intervention, or it might mean that you need to do some formative evaluation throughout your program. And when you know what you're trying to find out it gives you a really good idea then about where and how you're going to get that data.

08:15 The third pillar

The next pillar is all about choosing your level of evidence. And this is really about what's the purpose of your evaluation and that will determine the level of evidence that you might want to seek. Three important things to think about as shown on this slide.

The first is about proportionality and the extent to which the energy and effort and resource you're putting into your evaluation is proportionate to the energy, resource, and effort you're putting into your project. It's fair to say that there isn't a strong rule of thumb here because it really depends on the purpose of your evaluation. And you can imagine that if you're doing a pilot program you might want to put more of a percentage of your resource into that evaluation because it's really important to assess what's working well, what needs to change, and how you might then scale that up to a larger program, and so therefore the evaluation data is going to be critical in helping you design that larger project. Whereas if you're running an event that happens on a monthly basis and has a similar format on that monthly basis then you may, after evaluating the first few events, choose only to evaluate a sample of the future events because you've already gathered enough knowledge and understanding about what works and what doesn't work to inform what you're doing.

The second thing to think about is the use of the evaluation and who you're evaluating for. And if you're evaluating for you and your team you may require a different level of evidence than if you're for example evaluating for a Research Excellence framework case study where you're trying to evidence the impact of the engagement work that you've done.

The final thing to think about is the quantitative and qualitative methods and balancing those in how you then think about the evidence you present. Quantitative data is really good in terms of getting scale. “Yeah 80 of the 100 attendees all learned something new.” And qualitative data really helps you understand more about what's going on. So, if 80 had learned something new then the qualitative data will give you a sense of what they've learned that is new.

10:16 The fourth pillar

The fourth pillar is all about selecting your sources and tools and there are lots of tools to choose from and each of them have pros and cons. Here are some examples of the kinds of tools that you might use, and on our website, we've got more information about some of these tools and the pros and cons of their use.

It's worth saying that it's really important to think about the participants who you're going to involve in the evaluation and choosing tools that are appropriate for their needs and interests. And where possible it’s a really good idea to try and embed evaluation into the intervention rather than have it as an add-on at the end.

Some of these examples include things like physical ranking scales using people; or questionnaires that you might do; there’s personal meaning mapping, where perhaps individuals then try and make meaning from what they've engaged with, and that's particularly useful if you're working with people over a longer period of time; a graffiti wall's a quick and easy way to capture feedback at an event around a particular question, where people can write on a blackboard or stick up a Post-It to address a question that you're asking; and there are things like observations, where perhaps you work with an independent evaluator who observes what's going on in order to reflect back into the evaluation.

Some of the key questions to ask when you're planning your approach is the suitability of the intervention or the technique for the participants in the evaluation. The second thing to think about is how you're going to analyse the data. So, the resulting data – do you have the skills to analyse it, or do you have the skills across your team to analyse it? And also do you have the time? So, we might want to use a video booth to capture people's feedback during a live event, but do we have the time to watch those videos to transcribe and analyse the responses that were made?

There are clearly ethical considerations when doing evaluation; and those ethical considerations depend on who you're involving in the evaluation, what you're asking, and the data you're acquiring from people, and also what you're going to use that data for. You might want to consider sampling, so actually do you try and ask everybody at an event to respond to your evaluation or you're going to use a sampling strategy. And determining that in advance is really important. And finally, you might want to think about coding, so if you're gathering qualitative data how might you code that data and what techniques might you use to do that?

And you'll be pleased to know that there are coding frameworks available, and one that's particularly relevant to public engagement is the generic learning outcome framework, the Glo framework, that was developed by the Museum, Libraries, and Archives Council to support museums, libraries, and archives to assess the quality of experience gained by visitors to their space.

And you'll see that they have five categories that include things like knowledge and understanding, so have people learned something new. And also enjoyment, surprise, and creativity: how have their experience of the event?

Once you've gone through those four pillars – you've mapped out your theory of change; you've prioritized what you're going to measure so you understand the purpose of your evaluation and what you're trying to find out; you've chosen your level of evidence; and you've selected your sources and tools – you've developed basically a framework for your evaluation. And you have a much clearer sense about what you're trying to achieve.

13.39 Evaluation plans

Before I sign off, I just want to tell you a little bit more about what might go into an evaluation plan, and you'll be pleased to know an evaluation plan is just an extension of the four pillar approach. So, you need to include your aims, your objectives, how you're going to achieve those aims, your outputs, outcomes, and impacts, and all of those are already included in the logic model we showed you earlier.

You then need to know your overarching evaluation questions and you've figured those out when you've been thinking about prioritizing what you're going to measure.

You need to then think about your methodology, the strategy you're going to use, the data collection and the data analysis. Ad that's all about what you've explored in working out your level of evidence and the tools and approaches that you're going to use and how you're going to analyse that evidence.

And the final thing you need to think about in your evaluation plan – we haven't really touched on in the four pillar approach – but is that reporting. What kinds of outputs are you going to produce from your evaluation and for whom? Are you going to have a report that goes to your funders? In which case really helps to understand what they'll be looking for from that output. You might want to consider if you want to develop an output for participants in the program that might capture some of the learning that they've provided for you about what worked well and what didn't.

I really hope that this webinar has given you a taste of how to develop your own evaluation approach. And there are lots of resources available to help take you through the practicalities of doing that, many of which we've pulled together on our website. I really look forward to seeing how your evaluations develop and to hearing about the learning that you've had through evaluating your work well!