

Learning our way into Utilization-focused evaluation: the DECI experience

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Utilization focused evaluation mentoring for research projects in the ICTD field

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Abstract

UFE is an approach to evaluation that emphasizes the use of the findings and the learning process itself. The central premise of Utilization-Focused Evaluation (UFE) is that evaluations should be judged by their utility and actual use. In UFE, evaluators facilitate a learning process with attention to how real people in the real world apply evaluation findings and experiences. In designing a utilization-focused evaluation -- the attention is constantly on the intended use by intended users. UFE does not prescribe any specific content, method or theory. It is a framework, as opposed to another methodology. UFE can include a wide variety of evaluation methods. It is a process for learning and making decisions in consultation with those who can benefit from the evaluation. It is based on the fact that intended users will more likely utilize an evaluation in which they have ownership. Users can include beneficiaries, project managers and funders.

Through the DECI project¹, we were able to test-drive UFE with five Asia based partners. All partners were networks or project hubs involved in information communication technology for development (ICTD) research. One consisted of 23 different health research groups; another was introducing ICTD research into Mongolia, and several provided small grants and coaching to help young scholars gain skills and confidence in this emerging field. We helped projects produce five evaluation reports that were used, and we prepared a case study summarizing each. On that basis, we produced a Primer on UFE for evaluators that is available for free on-line in English, French and Spanish. More information:
<http://evaluationandcommunicationinpractice.ca/>

We learned that UFE works well as a decision-making framework. Its emphasis on focused uses enhances utilization of findings, as well as the evaluation process by constantly drawing attention to the overall purpose of the evaluation. We learned about the value of training via mentoring and about the importance of ascertaining readiness for this approach to create conditions that allowed it to thrive.

1. Theoretical and practical background

UFE is an approach to evaluation that emphasizes the *use* of the findings and the process itself². *"Utilization-Focused Evaluation (UFE) begins with the premise that evaluations should be judged*

¹ DECI-2: Developing Evaluation & Communication Capacity in Information Society Research – an IDRC-funded research project. DECI-1: Developing Evaluation Capacity in ICT4D, a project that focused only on UFE-mentoring in Asia. Source: <http://evaluationandcommunicationinpractice.ca/>

² Shulha, L.M. & Cousins, J.B. 1997. Evaluation use: Theory, research, and practice since 1986. *American Journal of Evaluation* 8(3): 195-208

by their utility and actual use.” (Patton, 2008: 37)³. In UFE, evaluators facilitate a learning process with attention paid to how real people in the real world apply evaluation findings and experiences.

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On a practical level, the introduction of UFE into research projects is an experiment in itself in that this approach allows the projects to direct the design and implementation of an evaluation. The ‘readiness’ steps at the start of UFE are designed to introduce the process in a step-by-step manner. DECI was designed as an action-research project to experiment with a mentoring process of UFE capacity development. In this paper and presentation, we provide a synthesis of five case studies that are fully documented both on the DECI project website and in a UFE Primer directed at evaluation professionals⁴.

Intended and actual (including unintended) use at individual, interpersonal and collective level

The DECI Project provided a platform that allowed ICTD researchers the option of learning about UFE by applying it to their research projects. They used it as a framework within which they could design and implement their evaluations as the intended primary users. This approach was in stark contrast to many of their past experiences of working with evaluation methodologies which had been imposed by outside funders.

At the **individual level**, the direct engagement of the researchers in the design process opened the door to individual learning as their personal ownership as users was already established. The twelve step UFE process which appeared complex initially when utilized did require an identification and gathering of a defined group of users from within the project or organization. Their ongoing commitment was required throughout the UFE process and it had the effect of building and/or consolidating **interpersonal and organizational relationships** around a common purpose – the design and implementation of the evaluation. An internal DECI review process consolidated the collective learning among the mentors and the evaluation leads in each project.

The intended purpose of UFE was also to facilitate an ongoing learning process leading to strengthening both the evaluation content, as well as improvement of the ongoing implementation of the research projects. All five DECI-supported projects produced valued evaluation reports which responded to the evaluation uses identified by the primary intended users. In addition, **it was reported that managers and researchers used the evaluation findings and this utilization was attributed to the relevance of the material because the primary users had had direct engagement in the process and subsequently gave credence to the**

³ Patton, M.Q. 2008. *Utilization focused evaluation 4th*. Ed. Sage.

⁴ <http://evaluationandcommunicationinpractice.ca>

recommendations.

In practice, UFE seeks to strike a new balance between the utilization of evaluation findings for strictly accountability requirements and those goals more focused on ongoing learning. The latter objective is reflected in the **openness to improvements and/ or adaptation of practices during the project's implementation**, as well as subsequently, in demonstrated enthusiasm and utilization of the knowledge generated.

Factors influencing use and (monitoring and) evaluation influence

Traditionally, evaluations have been done to and on organizations or projects without the agreement or active participation of its stakeholders – those conditions have often not been a prerequisite for carrying out an evaluation. The UFE approach considers **the participation of a project or organization's leadership and key stakeholders as essential to the eventual ownership and utilization of the evaluation findings**. A key additional UFE goal is that learning take place and that it is preferably used to strengthen implementation, not just post the evaluation process, but during it. The DECI experience is that the potential for demonstrable change and adaptation grows with meaningful engagement of the evaluations' primary intended users.

Also central to the effective use of the UFE framework is a vital **shift in the attitudes of the commissioners of evaluations**. In DECI, the funder of the five Asian ICTD projects was IDRC and it agreed to take a hands-off approach and to place the responsibility fully in the hands of the projects.

The evaluation staff persons, at the project level, were mentored by DECI's regionally-based mentors at the outset and throughout the project period and they also considered their own personal readiness for getting involved. This **readiness self-assessment** was an integral part of the UFE process, not only to assure their active participation and openness to learning. It also prepared them for their new role of facilitator of the UFE process within the project which in most cases differed from their past "doing" role to one of collaboration and coordination.

Thus **the UFE framework led to several related but distinct uses** simultaneously. There were instances of instrumental uses such as internal changes to funding grantees and planning for future funding. Conceptual use was likely given that the collaboration within the user group was emphasized and collective knowledge was amassed. Also, there was an apparent validation of the importance of evaluation and increased credibility accrued to the evaluation person and role. Process use within the projects was evident as the learning was used to strengthen practices, improve communications and most important increased the project's ownership and valuation of the evaluation findings.

Options to improve use and influence of (monitoring and) evaluation

The experience of the DECI Project reinforces the thesis advanced by Quinn-Patton, Williams and Carlsson and others that the UFE stress on **the identification of primary intended users and primary uses of an evaluation is one important way of improving the use and utilization of evaluations**. By definition, this framework recognizes that contexts, interests, requirements,

etc., vary and that “one size (methodology) cannot fit all⁵”, thus reinforcing the fact that UFE is a framework relevant to many methodologies.

Adapting to the timetable and pace of project is something that the DECI Project consciously undertook and it was possible because our funder IDRC allowed adequate time for the process to be completed. In some cases, the UFE process and the resultant evaluation process took nearly the entire time available, but in several, the work once commenced was completed within months to respond to a specific project need or reality.

As mentioned earlier, the explicit commitment of the leadership/management of a project was a requirement of the DECI UFE engagement and provision of support. However, the readiness of the senior managers and key stakeholders to participate actively throughout the process was only part of the readiness needed. **Readiness is a UFE step that is now considered of much greater importance than previously anticipated.** UFE takes time and must be timely and needs evidence of a real commitment. The readiness step additionally calls for a self-reflection on the part of the evaluator as to his/her abilities (and possibly need for additional support), on the part of the organization to designate an evaluation person (or in some cases contract or hire one).

Ideally, as noted earlier, the funder needs to be willing to relinquish some control of the evaluation to the project leadership and key stakeholders. It must be willing to trust the UFE process, as well as being able to **understand that its project partners can be responsible players** and can see the value of an evaluation as a learning and change process which will benefit all parties.

The DECI project experience demonstrated clearly that an understanding of the UFE process grows with hands-on experience and timely mentoring. **The “aha” moment comes several steps into the process** which is facilitated by the project evaluator, supported by in our case a DECI mentor based in the region. As a consequence of our DECI experience, it is our conviction that **effective and knowledgeable mentoring is essential to the UFE process and likely to most other effective training initiatives.** It is during the implementation period that the rubber hits the road and the concepts must be transformed into meaningful actions. DECI has used mentoring as an essential support to a challenging, but ultimately rewarding evaluation process.

Additional detail on the practical application of the UFE framework can be obtained by consulting the recently published “Utilization Focused Evaluation – Primer for Evaluators” – which builds on our DECI Project experience working with five ICT projects in Asia.

⁵ Carlsson, JM; Eriksson-Baaz, AM; Fallenius; and E Loevgren (1999). *Are Evaluations Useful? Cases from Swedish Development Co-operation*. Sida Studies in Evaluation (http://www.sida.se/sida/jsp/sida.jsp?d=118&a=2355&language=en_US) and Williams, K, B de Laat & E Stern (2002). *The Use of Evaluation in the Commission Services – Final Report* (http://europa.eu.int/comm/budget/evaluation/pdf/use_of%20evaluation_final_report.pdf) as quoted in Sandison, P. 2005. *The utilization of evaluations*. Ch.3. ALNAP Review of Humanitarian Action. London: ALNAP.