

Readiness & Mentoring: two touchstones for capacity development in evaluation

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Abstract

The purpose of this session is to share our current experience with readiness and mentoring as two key elements of our projects. We co-lead an action-research project in capacity development through which we mentor researchers in utilization-focused evaluation & research communication. We are learning that ‘readiness’ is a key and ongoing consideration that has power, timeliness, commitment, organizational, and cultural implications. If readiness is established (and maintained), it creates the context within which mentoring can have an impact. Mentoring is about supporting learners at the time and place when they desire and can use the advice. In contrast, training workshops tend to have limited outcomes because participants are often neither ‘ready’ nor able to absorb the information because they lack the knowledge of how to implement the learning in their project context. We summarize the factors and options that we are working on to maximize the benefits of combining readiness and mentoring as vehicles for capacity development in evaluation and communication.

1. Introduction:

We co-lead an action-research project in capacity development through which we mentor researchers in utilization-focused evaluation & research communication. The project is funded by IDRC (Canada) through the Information & Networks program that supports research in the global South. The first phase of our DECI project focused only on UFE: we completed five evaluations along with case studies and a Primer for evaluators (refer to our presentation during the first day of this conference). Our current project is called “Developing Evaluation & Communication Capacity in Information Society Research (DECI-2)” and it combines several objectives:

- To develop and test-drive a combined approach to mentoring in evaluation and communication;
- To build capacity among regional evaluation consultants (we have a team of mentors based in Africa, Asia and Latin America);
- To provide capacity development for project partners in both fields;
- To contribute towards the completion of UFE evaluations and communication strategies for designated I&N flagship projects;
- To communicate the DECI-2 project findings and training approach to practitioners, researchers and policy maker (through a USER Circle).

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2a. Theoretical and practical background - READINESS

The following items are copied from the original checklist for utilization-focused evaluation¹

- Project or organizational Readiness

Premise: Key people who want the evaluation conducted need to understand and be interested in a utilization-focused evaluation (U-FE).

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| <input type="checkbox"/> 1.1. Assess primary evaluation clients' commitment to doing useful evaluation based on an explanation of U-FE. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1.2. Assess if the program is ready to spend time and resources on evaluation. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1.3. Determine if primary evaluation clients are ready to assess various stakeholder constituencies to select primary intended users of the evaluation. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1.4. Assess what needs to be done and can be done to enhance readiness. |

- Evaluator readiness

Premise: Facilitating and conducting a utilization-focused evaluation requires a particular philosophy and special skills.

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| <input type="checkbox"/> 2.1. Assess the match between the <i>evaluator's knowledge</i> and what will be needed in the evaluation. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2.2. Assess the match between the <i>evaluator's commitment</i> and the likely challenges of the situation. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2.3. Assess the match between the evaluator's skills and what will be needed in the evaluation. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2.4. Make sure the evaluators are prepared to have their effectiveness judged by the use of the evaluation by primary intended users. |

We have learned that the above assessment steps are not straight-forward. Readiness has power, timeliness, and commitment, as well as organizational and cultural implications. It is not a once off, instrumental review, but rather an ongoing consideration.

Power has to do with hierarchy. The leadership of a project, and the funder are often assumed to be the primary users of an evaluation; however in UFE this is not always the case. Power also has to do with the inevitable weight/influence that a funder brings to a relationship as there is dependency in any grant funding arrangement. Timeliness has to do with the moments when a project is ready to take on evaluation or communication planning steps. Most projects have unpredictable calendars that shift due to many unpredictable factors. Being able to provide advice at the moment when it is needed and is contextualized appears to be key to the success of the mentoring. Commitment by staff and buy-in from managers is a requirement, and one that may be firm at one point, but may wither with time. Commitment is also about having staff

¹ Patton, M.Q. 2008. *Utilization-focused evaluation 4th*. Ed. Sage.

members who want to learn evaluation and communication skills, and who have the time and budget to do so. Lastly, organizations come in many colours and shapes, finding those with a learning culture is an important prerequisite for readiness. Some individual and organizational readiness conditions may exist, while others can be nurtured during a project. In either case, readiness is an ongoing process, not a static condition and it calls for different supports at different times.

The DECI-2 project spells out the following desirable readiness conditions in its MoU's with partners in the IDRC I&N Program:

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| <p>The I&N project provides:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The staffing of the evaluation and communication team (be the internal or contracted). • The funds to implement all steps of the evaluation plan and the communication strategy. • A commitment to allocate time during the project cycle to both areas. • Funders' commitment to UFE. • Leadership commitment. | <p>DECI-2 provides:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introductory briefings. • 30 person days of mentoring in UFE and Communication over an agreed project calendar. • Travel for 2 face-to-face sessions to be timed with the partner. • Additional mentoring by co-Principal Investigators. • Lesson sharing among projects. • Process documentation. |
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2b. Theoretical and practical background - MENTORING

UFE is learned through practice: experiential learning is at its core². It requires an accompaniment that matches learning moments. This timing is one reason why the impact of workshops is limited: people are often neither 'ready' nor able to absorb the information because they lack the knowledge of how to implement the learning in their project context. In DECI, we have been experimenting with a combination of coaching (that follows an established set of steps associated with the UFE framework) with mentoring (that focuses on guiding, adjusting, and trouble-shooting together). We have learned that we do a bit of both ("moaching?"). In addition, this supportive process in our project takes place through regional mentors who are, in-turn, learning themselves.

Mentoring is central to facilitating learning: as is illustrated –for example- by the 'Spaces for Learning' project that emphasizes the context, the conditions and timeliness of a capacity development effort³. Mentoring is a pivotal concept in the capacity

² Kolb, D.A. 1984. *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Prentice-Hall: Englewood Cliffs, NJ.

³ Weyrauch, V. 2013. *Lessons learned on promoting better links between research and policy in Latin America*. CIPPEC: Buenos Aires.

development literature, especially the observation that blueprints tend to fail⁴ and that capacity development requires action-research-reflection⁵.

We find that our touchstones are the principles of adult education and community development. We start with where the learner(s) are at; engage them on their terms; enable them to discover and own the learning process.

3. What we have learned and what we currently testing

Our project support to partners consists of 15 person days of mentoring in UFE and 15 in research communication, spread over a calendar that is agreed with the project team. Most of the mentoring takes place via Skype, though we fund two face-to-face meetings to coincide with major design and decision-making moments during the evaluation and communication work plan of each project. Since DECI-2 brings added challenges in terms of combining mentoring in evaluation and communication, we have added more support at the start to review or encourage readiness. While the DECI-1 experience has been amply reported, the DECI-2 process is very much underway as we speak and will continue for at least two more years.

*How do readiness+mentoring **affect** the Intended and actual (including unintended) use at individual, interpersonal and collective level?*

In one case (a program in Mongolia), we did not have a high level of readiness at the start, however good achievements emerged later in the project. This experience underlined just how readiness was/is a moving target, rather than a permanent condition. It happens at different times in different projects. While we have established requirements before a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) is signed, we have found that the project conditions are often fluid and readiness may wane. The lesson is that **readiness is an ongoing challenge that needs mentoring** to ensure it does not go away.

*What are the readiness+mentoring **factors** influencing use and (monitoring and) evaluation influence and what options are we incorporating?*

In the case of another project that we support, the funder's requirements in evaluation are causing some difficulty: **the logical framework being imposed by the donor has distracted the managers' attention away from the learning and engagement focus of**

⁴ Horton et al., 2003. *Evaluating capacity development: Experiences from research and development organizations around the world*. ISNAR, CTA, IDRC: The Hague, Wageningen, Ottawa.

⁵ Lennie, J. & Tacchi, J. 2013. *Evaluating communication for development: A framework for social change*. Routledge: Abingdon, Oxon, UK & New York

UFE. We are in the process of seeking a way to allow both approaches to co-exist (as has been done before with appreciative inquiry⁶).

While we see this task as technically possible, we are not yet sure whether the funder will be able to make room for UFE; the challenge may lie in **finding a safe way for commissioners of evaluation to experience UFE** without feeling they lose control. Until they realize that UFE can be as, if not more rigorous, than conventional evaluations and in the final analysis lead to a greater likelihood of the findings being implemented, the potential for complementarity will be overlooked or contested.

Having a **research focus in DECI 2** has given us the license to learn, to experiment, and a space that allows for mistakes; hence the subtitle on our website banner: learning through mentoring.

It has helped that the DECI-2 Project is **longer in duration** than our partners' own projects. We can afford to wait when readiness is not high, which also allows us to enhance it (for example by suggesting remedial steps that the project partners may take). In two instances, this step was completed when partners hired a contact person for UFE and another for Research Communication to ensure they had the personnel to cover both topics. The designation or appointment of contact points is itself an indication of readiness or lack of it.

Having a learning agenda, experimenting with mentoring in two related topics (evaluation and communication share many features⁷) has given us **the opportunity to mentor the partners, more as peers and less as experts.**

We are finding in DECI-2 that matching mentors with projects requires some **support at the start**, especially to build confidence in a process that is new and dynamic. We have set up a **system for process documentation** to ensure we have consistent evidence of our work. At the same time, we **seek a balance to allow for personal mentoring styles of our team to evolve.**

In conclusion, we are now more than ever questioning the utility and cost-effectiveness of one-shot training sessions that do not plan to tie in a mentoring component and an overall assessment of readiness.

⁶ http://arirusila.files.wordpress.com/2010/04/sida28355en_lfa_web.pdf

⁷ Ramírez, R. 2011. Why "utilization focused communication" is not an oxymoron. *Communication, media and development policy*, a blog by the Communication Initiative and the BBC World Service Trust <http://www.comminit.com/blog/372>