

UTILIZATION-FOCUSED EVALUATION: ENSURING LESSONS ARE PUT TO WORK

Main points

- Utilization-focused evaluation (UFE) begins with the premise that no evaluation should start unless primary USERS have been identified, and they have determined the expected USES.
- UFE does not prescribe any specific content, method, or theory. It is a guiding framework, as opposed to a methodology.
- UFE follows a set of well-defined steps that ensure rigor and relevance.
- Users take ownership over the evaluation purposes, the selection of methods, the analysis and the utilization of findings.
- In UFE, the evaluation professional plays the role of a facilitator, not of external judge.

Background

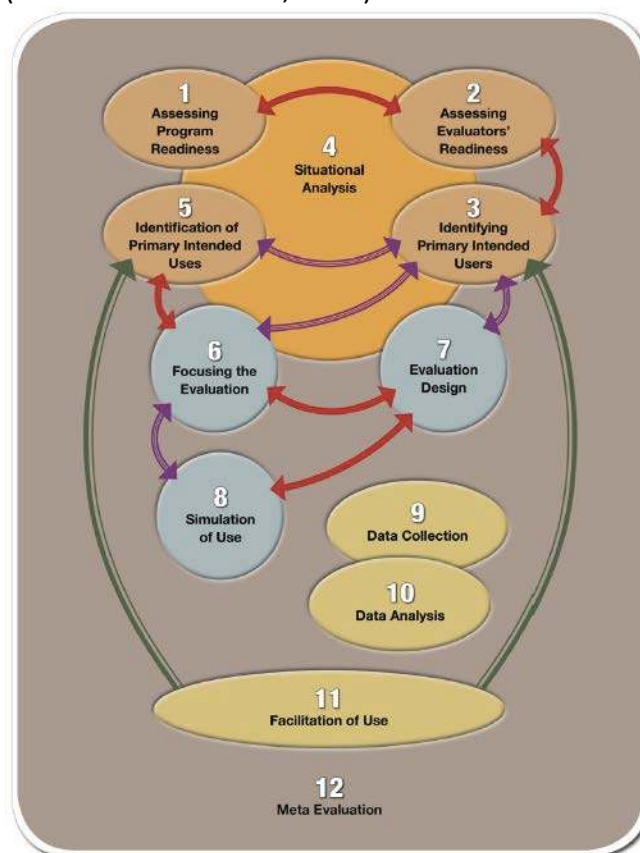
“Utilization-Focused Evaluation (UFE) begins with the premise that evaluations should be judged by their utility and actual use” (Patton, 2008, p. 37). In UFE, evaluators facilitate a learning process with attention to how people might apply evaluation findings and experiences. In designing a utilization-focused evaluation attention is constantly placed on the intended use by intended users. UFE can include a wide variety of evaluation methods within an overall participatory paradigm. Decision making, in consultation with those who can benefit from the evaluation, is an important part of the process. As important is the fact that intended users will likely utilize an evaluation in which they have ownership. UFE belongs to a push in the evaluation field for evaluations that get utilized. As

simple as this notion may sound, its application is mired in organizational and management challenges.

Challenges

In UFE, the definition of primary users is open to different stakeholders: they may be the funders of a project, or its implementers or even its beneficiaries. This decision may be delicate and it calls for a review of **readiness** at the very start of the process.

While UFE is summarized into a series of steps, the process itself is not linear (Ramírez & Brodhead, 2013).



The first five steps are interrelated: assessing program readiness; assessing

evaluators' readiness; identifying primary intended users' identification of primary intended uses; and situational analysis. This process may require several iterations of one or more steps and it needs to be anticipated and planned for, given that changes in one step will impact others.

Focusing the evaluation takes place through the definition of **key evaluation questions**; that in turn guide the design of the evaluation. 'Simulation' is about test-driving plausible data sets to double check that they respond to the questions. This step ensures course correction is possible, especially when it appears that some questions may not still be as strategic as they first appeared.

A unique aspect of UFE is Step 11: facilitation of use, that ensures the findings and evaluation processes are fed back to the users. The closing step 12 captures the experience through a meta-evaluation.¹

Analysis

UFE has been test-driven through two evaluation capacity development research projects funded by the International Development Research Centre (Canada) (see reference list).

Regional evaluation mentors were trained through practice. They were supported throughout the process by the two project leads; who coached them and provided trouble shooting support. They facilitated all steps of the UFE process with projects in Asia (first phase); in the current second

phase this process has gone global. This approach to capacity development is effective because partners receive the mentoring *at their own pace* and *according to their schedule*. It contrasts with the more conventional training workshop where a great deal of material is condensed into a few days with little opportunity to contextualize it, let alone absorb it.

Conclusions

UFE is learned through practice. Not only do evaluators quickly appreciate its potential; the primary intended users emerge with **evaluative thinking**. Some elements for success worth repeating include:

1. Mentors with a strong background in evaluation need to be selected, they need not be familiar with UFE. What is key is that they have outstanding facilitation and communication skills, as well as a willingness to learn. They can be partnered with project evaluators (on staff or contractors) who are invited to do the same: to test-drive UFE. A capacity development objective creates a safe environment for experimentation.
2. Work with a project funder interested in experimenting with this approach to capacity development in evaluation. The IDRC team allowed the mentors and the project partners the freedom to become users and define uses.
3. In the first experiment, evaluators and mentors should follow the UFE checklist systematically. While one quickly realizes that it is not linear and calls for more iterations, it is useful to tackle each task in order. An analogy

¹ In the latest book on UFE by Michael Quinn Patton, five additional steps have been added; see the Recommended readings and websites.

would be how one learns to drive a standard shift car: you begin with the first gear and move on to the second and so forth. Only later, with experience, you realize that when starting on a downhill road you can begin in second just as well; you also begin to learn to use gears to slow down, but this action comes from experience.

Recommendations

Recommendations for other projects and funders of projects interested in introducing UFE to a project:

- Confirm a commitment by funders and major stakeholders to explore the approach (in our case Utilization-focused Evaluation) through an action-research process.
- Clarify expectations early on with regards to the role of UFE relative to other possible evaluation and accountability needs. Is UFE a replacement or a complement to other evaluation needs?
- Work as a team, with mentors who are able to trouble-shoot, and with support from other members who can backstop as questions arise.
- Create an environment of trust where learning from mistakes is embraced.
- Acknowledge that the process takes time, and that the 'aha moments' will come once the approach is being implemented.
- Make use of the training modules and feel free to adapt them to each circumstance.
- Ensure that there are funds and dedicated time to complete all the steps of UFE, especially the last one

that calls for a reflection on the overall implementation of the approach; this is the point at which much learning happens.

- Carry out a mid-term self-reflection to course-correct and also to celebrate progress.

Recommended readings

Patton, M.Q. 2012. *Essentials of utilization-focused evaluation*. Sage.

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

Ramírez, R. & Brodhead, D. 2013. *Utilization-focused evaluation: A primer for evaluators*. Southbound: Penang.

Recommended websites

The Better Evaluation website includes a section on UFE:

http://betterevaluation.org/plan/approach/utilization_focused_evaluation

Developing evaluation capacity in ICTD (DECI-1) and Developing evaluation and communication capacity in information society research (DECI-2)
<http://evaluationandcommunicationpractice.ca>

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