

MOVING TOWARD COLLABORATION BY CREATING A PARTICIPATORY INTERNAL-EXTERNAL EVALUATION TEAM: A CASE STUDY

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Introduction

Comprehensive evaluation efforts commonly provide support for both internal and external evaluation activities. All too often, however, internal and external evaluators work independently. In this article, as a case study, we describe a collaborative effort among a group of internal and external evaluators. Based on our experience, we argue that having a combined participatory internal-external evaluation process, as opposed to one in which the internal and external evaluators work independently (although perhaps concurrently), is a more valuable and productive experience for the evaluation team and, as a result, the program. Although challenging, we found that a collaborative process facilitates the creation of a shared understanding of the program and the evaluation that we believe is not typically achieved when implementing internal and external evaluation separately or concurrently.

Internal and External Evaluator Roles

Traditionally in evaluation, we divide *evaluators* into two groups, internal and external, and *evaluations* into two categories, formative and summative. Formative evaluation activities are conventionally believed to be more appropriate for the internal

evaluator and summative and outcome activities for the external evaluator (Nevo, 1994). Stake suggests that "when the cook tastes the soup, that's formative, when the guest tastes the soup, that's summative" (quoted in Scriven, 1991b, p. 19). It is also commonly accepted that the external evaluator is more objective and has more external credibility than the internal evaluator (Nevo, 1994), while the internal evaluator is typically thought to be more familiar with the program context and less threatening than the external evaluator (Nevo, 1994). These differences translate into distinct advantages for internal and external evaluators.

There are several unique inherent advantages associated with using an internal as opposed to an external evaluator, and the converse is true as well. An internal evaluator is more familiar with the program and organizational culture. She has already built a relationship with the program staff and thus communicates more easily with them. Generally, an internal evaluator is less expensive than an external evaluator, and develops credibility with her organization over time and over many evaluations. Additionally, an internal evaluator does not leave a program at the completion of the evaluation, which allows her to assist with the implementation of changes (Owen, 1993; Patton, 1997; Scriven, 1991a).

The external evaluator is independent of the organization and thus is less likely to fall victim to organizational politics. She is also less likely to be affected by personal considerations relating to her job (i.e., concern about termination resulting from an accurate evaluation with negative findings) and is more likely to be perceived as independent and objective. Additionally, external evaluators are often more extensively trained in evaluation than internal evaluators (e.g., Patton, 1997; Scriven, 1991; Christie, 2003).

Recently, however, we have witnessed a transformation in the roles of internal and external evaluators, particularly in large urban school settings, where many of our federal and state-funded education programs are being implemented. We believe that this transformation helps to foster collaboration among internal and external evaluators and provides the opportunity for deeper, richer evaluation.

First, for the internal evaluator, we have witnessed a shift from a direct program position to an institutional position. Our more conventional understanding of the internal evaluator is that she is employed by the project and reports directly to project management (Nevo, 1994). However, we have found that in large urban educational institutions, such as inner-city school districts and public institutions of higher education, it is now more typical for the internal evaluator to be employed by the institution rather than by the project directly. For example, an internal evaluator working for the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) is paid by and reports to the district research and evaluation branch. Similarly, an internal evaluator at Pasadena Community College (PCC) is paid by and reports to the Institutional Planning and Research Office (IPRO).

In many instances, this shift in the internal evaluator's position has prompted a transformation in her role. For example, the internal evaluator is now commonly charged with gathering quantitative outcome data (e.g., program participant grades or test scores) that can be compared to a larger student population. Ironically, with this shift, the internal evaluator may feel rather removed from the program and valued only as a "numbers (i.e., accountability statistics) provider."

For the external evaluator, a change in her role has occurred with respect to her traditional identity as an outsider. With the internal evaluator taking on the role of gathering quantitative program data, the external evaluator, as a program outsider, often collects the more "intimate" formative data, which is often more closely related to program processes. Consequently, the external evaluator can become more connected to the inner workings of the program, staff and participants than the internal evaluator. However, the external evaluator's close proximity, for the most part, is still limited to the specific evaluand and not the institution and thus does not provide her with greater access to the wealth of institutional data easily available to the internal evaluator.

Combining Internal and External Processes

If circumstances allow, some theorists are proponents of combining internal and external evaluation (e.g., Patton, 1997; Nevo, 2001; Scriven, 1991). Indeed, combining internal and external evaluation is not novel. There are several typical methods for utilizing internal and external evaluators together. For instance, an organization can hire an internal evaluator to collect data, and an external evaluator to analyze the data. In a second example, the internal evaluator conducts the full evaluation and the external evaluator directs a meta-evaluation. A third approach asks both the internal and the external evaluators to conduct independent evaluations and then integrate and/or compare results. Finally, an organization can hire an internal evaluator to collect and analyze data and an external evaluator to monitor the evaluation process (e.g., Patton, 1997; Nevo, 1995). Although these four approaches are acceptable combinations, they do not maximize the advantages of employing internal and external evaluators in tandem as a collaborative process.

Whichever method is adopted, in our experience, when external and internal evaluation is conducted together, most often each is conducted concurrently and independently, rather than collaboratively. Typically, internal and external evaluators are introduced to the program separately and seldom spend a significant amount of time planning and conducting the evaluation *collaboratively*. This should not be surprising, however, given that in most instances working independently is viewed as easier and more time efficient than collaborating with others.

Let us now take a moment to explain what we mean by collaboration. We take the position that collaboration is the process of "*shared creation*, two or more individuals with complimentary skills, interacting to create a shared understanding that none had previously possessed or could have come to on their own" (Shrage, 1990, p. 40). However, true collaboration occurs only when all participants view the process as valuable and actively take on the challenge. Moreover, within the process of conducting evaluation collaboratively, participants must reexamine their preconceived notions of internal and external evaluators.

With little argument, evaluation scholars agree that internal and external evaluations are equally important and that each process can benefit greatly from interaction with the other. What we are advocating is not simply a combination of the two processes. Instead, we are suggesting a single process where two or more evaluators truly collaborate to plan, design, conduct, and report on the evaluation *together*. By working collaboratively as a

participatory team, internal and external evaluators can take advantage of the skills, talents, and insights of all participants; enhance everyone's understanding of the program being evaluated; develop and expand everyone's skills base; and create an evaluation that otherwise would be impossible.

As a case study, while examining the impact of a federally funded program (Title V) designed to increase the success and retention rates of low-income Hispanic students at Pasadena City College, we carefully documented the development of a collaborative participatory internal-external evaluation team. Well into year four of a five-year evaluation, we believe that a true collaboration has been established. Since the commencement of the evaluation, the evaluators and the program director have collected qualitative data, describing the interactions and processes of formal evaluation team meetings, informal meetings (such as lunches) and correspondence (e.g., emails, report drafts). Data used to inform the discussion presented in this paper include reflections and notes from: 18 formal meetings, 25 informal meetings, 33 email threads,¹ and 13 exchanges generated from the development of three reports. The evaluation team analyzed these data for themes and patterns. Next, we describe the program being evaluated and then the qualities and benefits of our collaborative efforts that have emerged from our analyses.

The Teaching and Learning Communities (TLC) Program at Pasadena City College

In 2000, Pasadena City College (PCC), a community college located in Los Angeles County, California, received a five-year Title V grant from the United States Department of Education. This grant was intended to increase the ability of at-risk students (with an emphasis on Latino students) to enroll and succeed in basic skills and ESL (English as a Second Language) courses through the development of teaching and learning communities (TLCs). These communities, at their most basic level, are designed to engage students in the learning process and, in turn, increase academic achievement. This is accomplished through student-centered programs that are committed to teaching excellence and strive to develop a healthy learning environment for students, faculty, and staff. Classroom-centered strategies, reorientation of teaching practices, development of interdisciplinary learning experiences, redefinition of students' work, and the move away from a more traditional top-down pedagogical model characterize PCC's TLC program.

The TLC program encourages faculty collaboration, student cohorts, and interdisciplinary instruction. Models range from single courses to block programs, and contents from several disciplines are integrated to emphasize a common theme. For example, English composition could be joined with a content course such as geology. In such a pairing, the students do a great deal of reading and writing about the concepts they learn in geology, while simultaneously improving their literacy skills and their conceptual understanding of geology. Another model is career-path blocks, which attempt to integrate several general studies courses for students in a particular occupational program, such as nursing, to emphasize the focused interests of the students.

In its first semester of courses, Spring 2001, the TLC offered six classes, involving 187 students and 6 faculty members. The classes included developmental English and math, and ESL. In its second year, the program experienced great growth and by Spring 2002, there were 605 students enrolled in 30 TLC classes. Several additional programs

emerged targeting specific subject areas and student groups, including the Summer Bridge/First-Year Experience, a program which recruits students during their senior year in high school and places them in cohorts during the summer, which are designed to introduce them to the college and basic skills courses. Students remain in cohorts throughout their freshman year, during which they attend general education courses together. In Year 3, the TLC Program continued to grow, serving over 1,000 students by the Spring 2002 semester. Grant participants formed blocks of classes for ESL students at each of the five levels in the program; they also began to develop a second career pathway for basic skills students, focusing on K-12 teaching. Finally, they began to take on a more active and visible role on campus, collaborating on projects with other campus programs, such as Staff Development, Service Learning, the Campus Diversity Initiative, and the Student Success Initiative.

The Internal-External Evaluation Team at PCC

When putting together its Title V application, PCC grant writers turned to research analysts from the college's Institutional Planning and Research Office for baseline data with which the writers could define activity outcomes and performance indicators for the five-year grant. Soon after the grant began (October 1, 2000), the Title V project director worked with the IPRO senior research analyst to gather student data on ethnicity, gender, retention, success, and persistence for required grant performance reports. The Title V staff and IPRO analysts also began to devise a broader plan for internal evaluation. In February 2001, as stipulated by the grant application, the project director selected an outside evaluator to conduct an external evaluation and guide the evaluation process.

During the initial stage of the evaluation, the Title V internal-external evaluation team's primary members were two research analysts from the IPRO and the external evaluator. Because the evaluation process was intended to be participatory, the Title V director and counselor were also part of the team. Their initial role was to help develop the evaluation questions and design. The coordinator of the Summer Bridge/First-Year Experience and a graduate research assistant joined the team at later dates. Thus, the evaluation team comprises people who are not traditionally considered "evaluators."

The first team meeting agenda included a general discussion of grant evaluation requirements. More importantly, prompted by the external evaluator, team members began to negotiate a shared understanding of the evaluation, the context in which it was taking place, the roles each could and should play in the process, and areas of individual and shared interests and expertise.

In determining how to design and conduct the evaluation, the team decided that because the program was centered on learning communities, the evaluators should employ theory and a practice similar to that of the TLC program. TLC encourages community members to construct knowledge together through the ongoing negotiation of roles, meanings, and goals. As a result, the program and its processes are constantly evolving. Such a fluid and changing program calls for a flexible participatory evaluation. To match the evaluation theory and a practice with the program theory and practice, the evaluation team chose to allow the design and evaluation questions to emerge over time, rather than forcing a rigid plan on a changing program. This influenced the way in which the internal and external evaluators worked as a team to study the program.

Throughout the evaluation, the team held regularly scheduled evaluation meetings. These meetings were critical to the "practice" of the community and provided opportunities for learning within a social context. It was important that all evaluation team members spend time together sharing ideas and becoming comfortable with each other. Because each team member brought different strengths to the evaluation, it was critical that each felt comfortable enough with the others to ask for suggestions or clarification when necessary and to offer the same in return. Beyond opportunities for support, these meetings allowed for discussions about evaluation practice. During these meetings the evaluation team members assigned and accepted individual and shared tasks; reported their progress; wrote and disseminated reports; revealed new insights; formed new ideas, and transformed their roles, identities, and participation on the team. These meetings helped create a learning community amongst the evaluation team. They guided the evaluation practice and allowed team members to come to new understandings about evaluation and the program.

The team members also participated in activities external to evaluation meetings. For example, they collectively presented evaluation findings to PCC's board of trustees and executive committee and other audiences. Additionally, they created a process where the external evaluators write an annual year-end report and distribute it to the evaluation team. Then, the internal evaluators summarize the findings and disseminate them to the broader campus audience. These activities, along with the day-to-day evaluation work, provided team members with an opportunity to be involved in the evaluation in many different capacities.

Process Use as an Outcome of a Collaborative Internal-External Evaluation Team

Creating a learning community within the collaborative internal-external evaluation team, as we have observed, has had significant impact on process use. By process use we are referring to "individual changes in thinking and behavior, and program and organizational changes in procedures and culture that occur among those involved in evaluation as a result of the learning that occurs during the evaluation process" (Patton, 1997, p. 90). Some of the most noteworthy changes have occurred internally at the college. For instance, the IPRO analysts have transformed their identity on campus and have acquired new skills, expertise, and confidence. The former role of providing accountability data has been transformed through the TLC evaluation process; the IPRO office is now a critical component of the college's Student Success Initiative. Evaluation activities have become an essential contributor to the college's understanding of learning outcomes and what transpires in the classroom. Additionally, the IPRO's monthly publication, *Research Findings*, is evidence of their new role and identity as an active player at the college. As a result of the collaborative process, the IPRO has established itself as an integral part of the college learning environment.

Beyond affecting the IPRO office, TLC has become an on-campus example of an externally funded program that takes evaluation seriously and uses evaluation for improvement by holding itself accountable and engaging program participants in the evaluation process. Prior to this experience, the college's collective perception of evaluation could be summarized as being a laborious and time-consuming process yielding minimal results. The current study has begun to modify this perception and, through the actions of

the collaborative team, evaluation is now seen as a worthwhile activity and is more welcomed by the campus as a whole.

Perhaps the most profound evaluation process use we have observed was the impact on evaluation team members. The evaluation team collectively has enhanced their knowledge of evaluation (as a process and as well as specific methodologies), the college, teaching and learning, faculty, students, and each other. They have learned to conduct focus groups; they revised the Fall Survey, a random student survey conducted each year during the fall semester, to include questions relevant to Title V project; and, have devised new evaluation projects that go beyond reporting the required accountability statistics to include studies designed to inform program improvement.

At the Year Four point of the evaluation, the internal-external team consists of a lead external evaluator, a graduate student external evaluator, a lead internal evaluator, a liaison, a counselor representative, a faculty representative, and IPRO research analysts. The lead external evaluator has transitioned from her original position as "teacher" and "expert" to a less active role. As other team members offer new ideas, the external evaluator now provides advice and approval but is no longer looked upon to create evaluation activities or steer the direction of the evaluation.

The graduate student external evaluator is new to the team. She became involved through the lead external evaluator, and the team regards her involvement as an opportunity to expand the evaluation effort. She assists with data collection and analysis, writes evaluation reports, and offers input and suggestions from a newcomer's perspective.

The IPRO team member initially chosen to lead the internal evaluation was eventually removed from his position due to minimal participation in the evaluation process. In his place, a new lead internal evaluator stepped in. She acquired her role through active and enthusiastic participation in the evaluation. She transformed her former "numbers provider" role and has become an integral part of the formative and summative evaluation process.

At the start of the evaluation, the Program Director acted as a liaison between the external and internal evaluators, and between the "official" evaluators (i.e., the evaluation team) and "others" (e.g., Title V staff and faculty and college administrators). As he has become more comfortable and knowledgeable about evaluation activities, he has moved from being a peripheral participant to becoming an active team member. For example, he now takes part in collecting data (e.g., interviewing college administrators). Additionally, evaluators now work directly with "others" and have engaged staff, faculty and administrators campus wide at various stages of the evaluation process.

A TLC counselor joined the evaluation team voluntarily. Her interest in evaluation and belief that the counselor's perspective should be heard led her to become an important member of the evaluation team. She now participates in and contributes to the evaluation in numerous ways. For example, she has developed surveys, worked with a consultant and the external evaluator to create a student database and tracking system, and works with the IPRO on data collection and analysis for an end-of-the-semester evaluation summary.

The faculty representative is currently transitioning into a new position as a Title V administrator. As such, her activities on the evaluation team are limited to peripheral participation, but she is expected to adopt a more active role in the future.

Internal-External Collaboration and Evaluation Ethics

Beyond the previously discussed benefits of creating a single internal and external evaluation team, this approach also helps to address some ethical issues encountered while conducting a participatory evaluation. These ethical challenges ask us to consider some formidable questions. For example: How involved should stakeholders be in the evaluation? Which stakeholders should be involved? How should an evaluator proceed if stakeholders lack the skills necessary to be highly involved in the evaluation? By creating a collaborative internal-external evaluation team, some of these ethical questions seem to become less problematic.

In a discussion of ethics in evaluation, Torres and Preskill (1999) maintain that extensive involvement of stakeholders in an evaluation may offer a wider variety of perspectives and experiences, improve the validity of the results, and increase the chance for evaluation utilization. However, they also express concern regarding the extensive involvement of stakeholders because they often lack the basic skills needed for correctly and accurately evaluating programs. While a legitimate concern in all participatory evaluations, it seems to be less of a challenge in evaluations where internal and external evaluators collaborate. In such circumstances, internal evaluators are themselves often stakeholders in the evaluation. Additionally, the internal evaluator has the knowledge of and contacts within the organization to recruit stakeholder participants with evaluation knowledge and skills. Therefore, the internal evaluator is more likely to know and encourage involvement of stakeholders with evaluation skills and as a result is less likely to rely on under-skilled stakeholders to conduct evaluation work. In addition, being closer to many of the key program stakeholders in proximity as well as operationally, internal evaluators are more likely to deliberately and unintentionally increase organizational evaluation capacity through conversation and contact with stakeholders. Additionally, external evaluators are often more skilled in methods and as a result are better positioned to improve stakeholder participants' evaluation knowledge and skills. Consequently, internal-external evaluator collaboration has the potential to yield more efficient participatory evaluations by reducing the concern for involving under-skilled stakeholders, while increasing the organization's evaluation capacity.

Challenges and Limitations

No approach is void of challenges, nor is any study limitation free. In this section we discuss some of our challenges and limitations. Here, we will first address stakeholder participation and the challenges attrition presents to a participatory evaluation and collaboration. Then, we discuss the limitations of self-study.

As described in this article, a requisite for collaboration is participation. Attrition, and perhaps more importantly (on its flip side), retention, of team members is a critical element for success when creating a collaborative internal-external evaluation team. Collaboration depends upon, and is defined by, the ongoing negotiation of roles, meanings, and goals. Key to this process is the continual interaction of team members. In the case presented in this article, only one team member left the project, and it was early on in the evaluation (during Year 1). It is our experience, and the belief of other prominent

evaluators (e.g., House, 2003), that evaluator and program staff attrition is generally high. Consequently, we think it is unusual for team members to remain relatively unchanged for four years. We believe that our success may be attributed to, at least in part, the consistent participation of team members.

Also important to mention are the limitations of observing our collaborative process from the "inside." That is, using our own notes, exchanges, and observations to document this process rather than having an outside observer do this for us. We acknowledge the subjective nature of this kind of work, however, we worked to ensure, as best as possible, that our description of the internal-external evaluation collaborative process we offer in this article is grounded in data and not conjecture. The procedure we used involved consistent checking of our observations. For example, after searching for patterns and categories in our data, we made sure to verify our observations and hypotheses with participants that were involved in the evaluation as well as with those that were more peripheral to the process. We, as a group, examined rival explanations to our observations and then solicited reactions to the data and analysis by stakeholders and participants. And finally, we shared an earlier version of this article, void of identifying information, with our larger stakeholder audience for reaction and comment.

Conclusion

Although discussions of the advantages of utilizing both an internal and external evaluator are not novel, literature specifically discussing a collaborative internal-external evaluation team is limited, and we believe this shared process is worthy of attention. Once the decision is made to employ both internal and external evaluators, it is our recommendation that the approach discussed in this article be considered as an alternative to more concurrent internal-external evaluation practices. Collaboration throughout the evaluation process, in this instance, has positively impacted the program, stakeholders, and productivity of the evaluation team. However, this evaluation team design can only be successful with the appropriate resources, which include full participation from the internal and external evaluators and substantial interaction with stakeholders. With these features and others described in this article, a collaborative team approach is likely to result in an understanding of the program that would not be possible otherwise, and ultimately a more useful evaluation.

Note

1. An email thread is defined as the initial email in a series, plus all subsequent emails that re-generated in response to the initial email.

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