

The Power of Reflection: An introduction to participatory evaluation techniques

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CONTENTS

Why Evaluate?

Where to Start

Three Participatory Evaluation Techniques

References

Introduction

Community groups commonly talk about needing simpler tools to evaluate their efforts. With this resource, you can begin benefiting from your own reflection activities without needing an outside evaluator.

The following pages present a theoretical introduction to participatory evaluation and three simple evaluation techniques that can be used by any community group or network. You can employ these practical and adaptable approaches to:

- ▶ inform the development phase of a partnership,
- ▶ reflect on group dynamics and processes, and/or
- ▶ identify results after a project or community event.

Using participatory techniques can also help re-energize your group members' relationships and commitment.

We invite you to try a few!

CHECK OUT - HC Link's [Participatory Evaluation Toolkit](#) to deepen your understanding of a participatory approach and access seven additional techniques to use with your community group or partnership.

WHY EVALUATE?

When we take time to evaluate, we gain new insights and build shared understanding to better direct our work moving forward.

Evaluation can help to:¹

- ▶ **Make judgments** — To what extent do people experience this group/network as welcoming?
- ▶ **Facilitate improvements** — What helps, what hinders, and how could we do things differently?
- ▶ **Generate knowledge** — What are the most significant impacts we have made together?

Evaluation gives us information (also called “data”) that all types of people – including participants, organizers, facilitators, partners, politicians and funders – can learn from. Of particular value to voluntary groups and networks, evaluation can also (re)energize group relationships and commitment.

Participatory Evaluation is Unique

To take a participatory evaluation approach means to invite and facilitate more involvement and co-leadership from the people most directly involved with, and affected by, our efforts.²

Depending on where you are coming from, participatory evaluation may be a natural extension of how you already work (e.g. Indigenous traditions or community development approaches), or it may involve “...radically rethinking who initiates and undertakes the [evaluation] process, and who learns or benefits from the findings...”³

WHY CHOOSE A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH?⁴

- ▶ Advance equity among group members.
- ▶ Emphasize the most relevant questions.
- ▶ Build collaboration skills.
- ▶ Spark creativity and innovation.
- ▶ Apply insights to action.
- ▶ Reflect your culture and values.
- ▶ Engage in a fun and energizing way.

WHERE TO START

Evaluation engages the power of reflection by taking a systematic approach, but it can still be quite simple. The basic pattern of an evaluative feedback system looks like this:

- a. Decide on one (or more) guiding question(s).
- b. Select a technique to gather information.
- c. Explore *what?* - Discuss and analyse the information (data) you collect.
- d. Discover *so what?* - Seek consensus about your findings (conclusions) and recommendations.
- e. Discuss *now what?* - Identify actions you can take based on what you learned.

Powerful Evaluative Questions

Look for questions with the power to gather information and perspectives that take your group/network to a new level of understanding, strategy and synergy. Invite key stakeholders to select evaluative questions with you. Keep the questions simple and direct. Powerful questions are not complex questions.

Here are some questions HC Link consultants found valuable for participatory evaluation discussions and results.

1. What happened? (share observations and stories)
 - ▶ So what? (look for insights and learnings)
 - ▶ Now what? (plan for change)
2. Tell a story that illustrates...how this experience has made a difference in your life, work or community.
3. What do we see that is different, since three years ago, that this initiative/group contributed to?
4. Who is coming to our activities? Who is not coming? What might we change to reach out more?
5. Why do I participate in this group? How well are my personal goals being met? What could improve things?

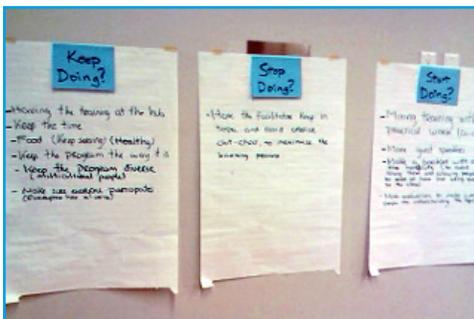
“THE SCIENTIST IS NOT A PERSON WHO GIVES THE RIGHT ANSWERS...[BUT] ONE WHO ASKS THE RIGHT QUESTIONS.”

- Claude Lévi-Strauss⁵

6. What do we see that is different in our efforts since last year, in terms of:
 - ▶ Numbers?
 - ▶ Types of activities?
 - ▶ Types of participants?
 - ▶ Willingness to volunteer for tasks?
7. What helps? & What gets in the way?
8. What are the big rewards? & What are the big challenges?



9. What should we:
 - ▶ Stop doing?
 - ▶ Keep doing?
 - ▶ Start doing?



💡 TIP

To include people with a visual disability, be sure to read out the text on post-it notes when they are going on the wall, and if you are sorting/analysing ideas, periodically review what texts or images are being considered together.

💡 TIP

Take a picture of your flipcharts and wall charts/images at the end of the session. You can paste these into a document or email, and may not need to type up your report.

THREE PARTICIPATORY EVALUATION TECHNIQUES

On the following pages are descriptions of three participatory evaluation techniques that are simple and fun. Don't forget, you can also ask your powerful questions using standard data collection techniques (like surveys, focus groups and/or key informant interviews) and still emphasize participation during your evaluation design, as well as when you analyse the results of your research.

For more examples, check out HC Link's forthcoming participatory evaluation toolkit. Or try adapting participatory facilitation techniques you already use to an evaluative discussion.

A. Lineups (also known as human continuum)⁶

Lineups are a very physical way of looking at where people's experiences, feelings or preferences fit along a spectrum or scale. They generate some immediate quantitative insights, which are then explored further to highlight qualitative stories or explanations. Lineups can help your group respectfully explore and better understand what's behind differences of experience or opinion. Here are some sample questions that lineups can reflect on:

- ▶ How well do you think we have met our objectives for this project – from “not at all” to “completely”?
- ▶ How are you feeling at the end of this session – from “tired” to “highly energized”?
- ▶ To what extent are other leaders in your sector/community aware of the activities and impacts of this network – from “not at all” to “completely”?



Logistics

SPACE	TIME	MATERIALS
Enough space to line up (see picture). If your space is tight in length, invite people to line across an arc.	8-20 minutes. This depends on how much time you spend exploring the reasons behind peoples' choice of position, and whether you ask more than one question (try 1-3).	Optional: note taker or flipchart to document the debrief dialogue.

Instructions

1. Explain the technique, define the extreme ends of the lineup, and clarify your respect for individual choice (i.e. clarify that participation is optional and people may choose to just watch).
2. Pose a question.
3. Invite people to place themselves along an imaginary line on the floor, according to their personal response to the question you have posed. Invite them to chat with other people along the line in order to best determine what spot matches their experience/perspective, and allow time for them to do this.
4. While still standing in the line, take a look at the quantitative results of your lineup survey. Next, explore the (qualitative) meaning behind what you see by inviting people to explain their place in the line-up. For example: "why did you end up at this location?" and/or "what keeps you at this location?" Explore whether this new information leads your group to any important lessons or other insights.

Tips

- ▶ In advance, check that the question you are asking is one that people will feel comfortable to explore together. Lineups are similar to a Likert scale survey but everybody can see each other's response, so confidentiality may be an issue.
- ▶ It is often helpful to curve the line a bit during the probing discussion, so that people can better see each other.

B. Head-Heart-Feet⁷

The head-heart-feet evaluation offers a simple complement of questions, drawing on the analogy of a “whole person”. Here are some examples of how it can be used in different ways, at different times:

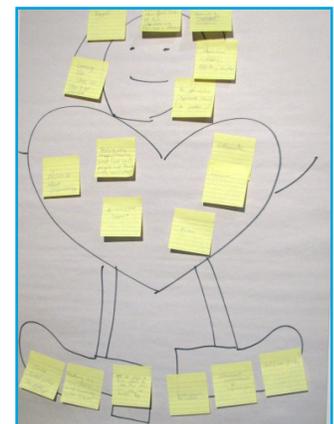
- ▶ At the beginning... of a new partnership: use it to survey everyone in the room about their hopes for the collaboration.
- ▶ In the middle... of a day long workshop (e.g. before lunch): use it to assess the morning’s activities and consider if afternoon plans should be adjusted.
- ▶ At the end... of a collaborative planning session: use it to reveal diverse impacts of the session on participating individuals and partners.

Logistics

SPACE	TIME	MATERIALS
Wall space (or a flipchart stand) in a location that will facilitate people’s comfort to post and read the notes.	5 minutes for people to write and post their responses.	Flipchart paper
	Add another 5-15 minutes immediately after, or at the beginning of your next gathering, to read/summarize and reflect on the results.	Post-it notes
		Pens or thin markers for people to write their comments.

Instructions

1. On large flipchart paper, draw a stick figure with a large head, heart and feet.
2. Write on the flipchart and/or explain the symbolism of each body part:
 - ▶ Head = what did I learn?
 - ▶ Heart = how am I feeling?
 - ▶ Feet = what will be my next steps?
3. Distribute three small sticky notes to each person, and invite them to comment and post their responses according to each symbol and related question. Invite people to read the responses of others when posting their own.



4. Take time immediately - or at the beginning of your next gathering - to review the results together:
 - ▶ What patterns do we see?
 - ▶ Does anything surprise us? Or concern us?
 - ▶ What can we learn from this feedback?
 - ▶ What, if any, action should we take based on this feedback?

Tips

- ▶ Be flexible. People may interpret the questions in slightly different ways and that is okay. The main purpose of this technique is to create an opening for people to reflect and share very personal qualitative insights. These can later be used to initiate a larger group reflection and response.
- ▶ In a group that includes individuals or representatives from different subgroups (for example, parents and teachers) you can give different coloured post-it notes to each group to help identify if there are any patterns based on those differences.

C. Paper Quilt

Paper quilts are a relatively quick arts-based evaluation technique. They allow time for individual and/or small group reflection, then use images and story to express ideas.

Here are two examples of groups using paper quilts in different situations:



POWERFUL QUESTION:

Why do I care? What do I value most about this organization?

This paper quilt activity took one hour: twenty minutes was allocated to individual, pair and small group reflections before the squares were drawn (because of this the images are more complex and the content has more depth).



POWERFUL QUESTION:

Recognizing that many of us passionate folks have very busy work, volunteer and social lives, what can we do to maximize our team energy and effectiveness?

This paper quilt reflection took 20 minutes: ten minutes to reflect in pairs and complete squares, then ten minutes to collectively analyse & identify a “small wins” action plan.

Logistics

SPACE	TIME	MATERIALS
Enough wall space (or a flipchart stand) to house the quilt squares all together. If the wall is not directly in front of where people will sit, you will want room to stand together in front of the quilt.	Variable. Usually 30-60 minutes. This depends on your group size and the complexity of the question being explored. The individual sharing and the large group analysis take up the most time.	Squares of paper or card stock, ideally in different pale colours
Tables are useful, but not completely necessary, for when people are drawing their squares.		Markers or crayons
		Masking tape or blue sticky tack
		Flipchart for notes on the evaluative discussion.

Instructions

1. Prepare the paper quilt squares. 8 ½ x 8 ½ squares are a nice size, but smaller squares or post-it notes can work with smaller groups.
2. Invite people to reflect on an evaluative question (the reflection can be done alone, in pairs, or in small groups).
3. Pass around colourful markers and invite everyone to draw a picture, a symbol, or 1-2 words (in any language) on their square.
4. Have people take turns sharing their square, adding an explanation (if they want), and then posting it to the wall to create a colourful “paper quilt”
5. Together, discuss common themes, surprises, learnings and/or action opportunities. Note these evaluation results on your flipchart.

Tips

- ▶ A longer variation: invite people to reflect individually, then in pairs or small groups using a reflection sheet. Later, invite them to draw paper quilt squares based on their discussion.
- ▶ You can also use a paper quilt to explore the impacts of a project or event. Ask people to reflect on what has changed for them or a key learning, and then draw a picture, symbol or word which reflects the change or learning.
- ▶ Be sure to take a picture of the paper quilt - for tweeting to the world or inserting into a report.

ENDNOTES

¹Anita M. Baker, Beth Bruner. *Participatory Evaluation Essentials: An Updated Guide for Nonprofit Organizations and Their Evaluation Partners*. (The Bruner Foundation, 2010). <http://www.evaluativethinking.org/docs/EvaluationEssentials2010.pdf>

²Institute of Development Studies. *Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation: Learning from Change*, IDS Policy Briefing, issue 12 (1998). <https://www.ids.ac.uk/files/dmfile/PB12.pdf>

³Institute of Development Studies. p2.

⁴KU Work Group for Community Health and Development. "Participatory Evaluation", *Community Tool Box*, Chapter 36, Section 6, (University of Kansas, 2015). <http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/evaluate/evaluation/participatory-evaluation/main>

⁵Claude Lévi-Strauss. *Mythologiques: Le cru et le cuit*. (Paris: Plon, 1964).

⁶R. Arnold, B. Burke, C. James, D. A. Martin, and B. Thomas. *Educating for a Change: A Handbook for Community Educators*. (Toronto: Between The Lines, 1991).

⁷Arnold et al.

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HC Link works with community groups, organizations, and partnerships to build healthy, vibrant communities across Ontario. We offer consulting services, learning and networking events, and resources in both English and French. Our services are funded by the Government of Ontario and are provided free of charge where possible.

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