

Progressing the dialogue about a framework for Aboriginal evaluations: sharing methods and key learnings¹

Aboriginal evaluation methodology is a relatively new construct. While much insight has been generated in recent years in relation to conducting research among Aboriginal groups, little has been generated concerning evaluation methodologies. How are Aboriginal projects evaluated, by whom and for what purpose? What do Aboriginal people want evaluated and how might this be measured? How can non-Aboriginal evaluators respond to these issues effectively and respectfully in their evaluation of Aboriginal programs? This article addresses these questions by sharing key learnings from an evaluation of an intermediate labour market program² conducted in remote Western Australia. The evaluation used a multifaceted methodology involving interviews, art and photovoice and various techniques to increase engagement, hear the ‘voice’ of local people and ensure that findings were accessible to community members, program staff, government and other sectors. Important cultural and community factors influenced the evaluation design and subsequent implementation of the findings. Through shared reflexive practice it is hoped that this article will shape a framework for conducting effective and collaborative evaluations with Aboriginal organisations and communities.

Introduction

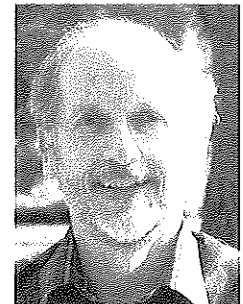
While it is recognised that a number of existing frameworks already provide guidance for conducting evaluations with Aboriginal communities (AES 2010; AIATSIS 2011; Orr et al. 2009), most focus on research rather than evaluation or they generalise across various, and often very different, communities and contexts. The development of a framework for conducting more effective evaluations with Aboriginal organisations and communities should undoubtedly be underpinned by the principles outlined in existing research guidelines. However, we also believe that such a framework should be informed by reflections on the following questions that have been asked of us, and which we have asked ourselves:

- 1 How are evaluations targeted to Aboriginal people, by whom and for what purpose?
- 2 What do Aboriginal people want evaluated and how might this be tackled?

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3 How can non-Aboriginal evaluators respond to these issues effectively and respectfully?

This article addresses these questions by presenting the views of three non-Aboriginal³ evaluators, each with varied experience in evaluating programs and services involving Aboriginal people living in urban, regional and remote communities of Australia. It shares our learnings, predominantly drawn from an evaluation of an intermediate labour market program involving local men and women living in a remote community in the Southern Kimberley region of Western Australia. It describes a valuable learning process, while also highlighting that we still have much to learn. Through shared reflexive practice we hope to help progress the development of a framework for conducting more effective, respectful, empowering and collaborative evaluations with Australia's Aboriginal organisations and communities.

1 How are evaluations targeted to Aboriginal people? By whom and for what purpose?

Too often we hear the criticism that evaluations (and research) with Aboriginal communities have been conducted by 'outsiders'. Outsiders are often perceived to attempt to engage on a short, one-off basis, often arriving with a predetermined agenda to extract specific 'data' without prior consultation. They then leave without any follow-up regarding implementing possible recommendations or benefits for the community. Furthermore, evaluations sometimes occur without locals seeing any change or improvement as a result of their efforts. It is no wonder that many Aboriginal people have been left feeling suspicious of, and disenfranchised by, the evaluation process.

As part of the problem, evaluations can be perceived to come from outside the community's interests and control and based instead on an external agenda, such as seeking to know that project funds have been well spent. This can lead to the disempowerment and disengagement of local people. Furthermore, the questions local people seek to ask and the answers they wish to strengthen can be ignored in the light of outsiders' evaluation frameworks, funding priorities and values. Communities that have a long history of disengagement can become more so and key insights can be overlooked.

For example, when we went to evaluate an intermediate labour market program within a remote Aboriginal community, we did so in order to provide the organisations that initiated the study with quantitative evidence that the programs they were funding were effective in meeting contractual targets. Such evidence included: numbers of young men engaged in employment and training; attendance rates; and number of houses built. However, as we came to know more of the inner workings of the program, we uncovered qualitative evidence that shed new light on the quantitative data. Without the latter, the former quantitative findings would have been quite limited.

It would have meant avoiding engagement with the local community and the subsequent identification of new issues that community members considered to be critically important to the success and sustainability of the program.

One finding related to the culture of work and how some young men faced a number of obstacles in taking up full-time employment. Such insights offered the possibility of devising strategies that could begin to address key underlying issues facing the objectives of the program. Thus, in our experience it was important to bear in mind the evaluation questions 'outsiders' were asking, as well as those asked by 'insiders'.

Evaluation stages—before, during and after

In line with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) principles of research (AIATSIS 2011), the National Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC) values and ethics guidelines (NHMRC 2003) and others (e.g. Taylor 2003, p. 47), we firmly support that, in order to conduct ethical and respectful evaluations with Aboriginal people, consideration must be given to the 'before', 'during' and 'after' stages of the evaluation process. This includes: up-front and ongoing consultation; negotiation and mutual understanding; ongoing respect and recognition; free and genuine involvement of Aboriginal people; and the delivery of a final product that is accessible and incorporates shared benefits for both parties, including giving back to the Aboriginal people a report that responds to their needs and interests.

However, there remain a number of challenges for evaluators in implementing these principles. Literature (Scougall 2006; Spooner, Flaxman & Murray 2008) and our own experiences highlight these as most commonly being: the considerable time involved in establishing rapport and building trust with the Aboriginal people involved; the distance and time involved in accessing many Aboriginal communities; the costs associated with committing the necessary resources to the project; the lack of understanding about this matter by many funding bodies; and, not least, the lack of cultural competence and contextual knowledge held by evaluators.

As evaluators, we need to recognise that we are outsiders in the community and, therefore, we must consider our actions before, during and after community visits. It is important to first seek permission to visit from the Community Council or other key representatives, and time needs to be allowed for this approval process to occur. Similarly, time and resources need to be committed to a multi-staged process, including multiple community visits. The scheduling of engagements with the community needs to be flexible, and must factor in planned and unplanned cultural events and ceremonies. In addition, there are often travel difficulties caused by weather and infrequent transport options.

In the example already mentioned, we incorporated four stages into our evaluation process, in an attempt

to avoid the disenfranchising process of many predecessors and in order to genuinely respect the phases of 'before', 'during' and 'after'. This included three community visits, each involving about a week on-site, and an additional week travelling to and from the community. Specifically, the work comprised:

- *Stage 1:* Seeking permission from the local Council to visit; we could not assume this permission.
- *Stage 2:* A visit to: provide background for the intended evaluation; introduce the evaluation team; seek input from locals on how they perceived the need for evaluation; and ascertain how they would like the evaluation process to work (while clarifying any issues related to this and expressing a willingness to be flexible).
- *Stage 3:* A visit to gather data and seek ongoing feedback on the evaluative process.
- *Stage 4:* A visit to present the evaluation findings to local stakeholder groups and to disseminate the report while allowing time for community members to reflect and provide feedback.

Fortunately, in our experience, we had a supportive management team committed to a respectful evaluation process. This is not typical however. Often the challenge is getting the organisations that seek the evaluation to see value in, and commit funding to, the necessary time and resources required to build an evaluation relationship with the local community and key stakeholders. It is important, however, to have these organisations recognise this value if evaluations are to be based on consultation and trust and seriously attempt to evaluate according to the questions that those most involved wish to ask.

Who should evaluate? The use of sponsors

The issue of who should conduct evaluations among Aboriginal people is complex. Typically, the people who are most skilled at knowing whether, and how, programs work within their communities are community members. However, many communities lack the capacity or confidence to undertake evaluation, particularly in relation to their own ways of seeing and understanding the particular project. While it is our belief that evaluators themselves need not be Aboriginal, we believe that non-Aboriginal evaluators need to acknowledge that their cultural difference can present significant barriers to them interpreting the feedback and messages communicated by local Aboriginal people fully and accurately (Taylor 2003; Wehipeihana 2008, p. 42). This refers not just to barriers in interpreting local tongue, but also interpretation of colloquialisms, non-verbal communication and local cultural practices.

Because of this inability for an 'outsider' to ever completely understand the specific cultural context of a community, like others, we believe that engaging a 'sponsor' who has community knowledge and experience is imperative to increasing communication and trust. This sponsor can provide the evaluator

both with guidance and translation concerning cultural norms and practices, and a 'gateway' to the community, its leaders and those who can offer insight and comment on the project (Berends & Roberts 2003; Taylor 2003). This process of breaking down the walls to engagement to ensure the Aboriginal people involved are heard as well as seen is important (McCoy 2012).

If chosen wisely, the sponsor should also be able to help build social capital and increase the legitimacy of the project (Spooner, Flaxman & Murray 2008, p. 30). Of course, in choosing the sponsor, consideration needs to be given to whom this might be, in order to avoid dominating voices or the intrusion of an outside agenda. Projects can generate political conflict between kinships or community members and/or may not adhere to appropriate gender or local cultural protocols (de Lancer Julnes, cited in Spooner, Flaxman & Murray 2008, p. 30).

In our example, our sponsor had been known to the community for over 20 years, including many years living within the community. He had built rapport with a diverse range of community members and also shared an understanding of the local culture and language. Engaging him as a sponsor was a critical component of the evaluation's success. Not only did it assist in engaging local people (particularly the men), but it also helped guide culturally appropriate conduct for the evaluation, including an understanding of gift exchange, gender and conflict protocols. He also knew about the community's unique experience with colonisation as well as how the latter continued to influence people's behaviour and attitudes. The sponsor's involvement also ensured local voices could be better understood and represented more accurately, particularly during data analysis and reporting. Moreover, it meant the process involved in developing relationships and rapport with the community became significantly prioritised, focused and supported.

Other program staff living in the community were also invaluable in helping one of the authors engage with local community members because of their existing relationships and rapport with the community. In acknowledging the distinction between men's and women's cultural business, it was appropriate to have a well-regarded female provide the introduction to the local women. Of course, there were still no guarantees that the local women would warm to the author personally. However, having this link undoubtedly aided the process. The value of multiple site visits (and multiple interactions within each visit) became apparent through engaging the local women. What began as seemingly quite silent, distant and disinterested interaction on behalf of the women, strengthened over time to become warm, open, engaging and rewarding.

Reporting

Evaluations, like research, should be perceived by those experiencing it to be of benefit and value. Like Russell Taylor (2003, p. 46), we believe that evaluators

(and the evaluation process) should act as a 'potential agent of change' by empowering community members and local organisations to initiate or continue positive change. This role can manifest itself through all stages of the evaluation, influenced by how and by whom the evaluation is conducted and particularly through the evaluation reporting process.

Evaluation findings need to be delivered in a format that is accessible and able to be utilised by all stakeholders, particularly the Aboriginal people involved. Quite often we, as evaluators, are required to prepare long, detailed reports for government and other funding bodies. However, this format is not always of interest or accessible to all Aboriginal people, particularly for those where English is a second or third language. Thus, evaluators should consider preparing multiple reports that are tailored to various stakeholders. As part of this, consideration should also be given to the use of oral, visual and interactive reporting to provide a more engaging and typically more accessible report to communities (Berends & Roberts 2003, p. 58).

For our community evaluation we decided that two reports would be necessary—a report that addressed each of the contractual key performance indicators (KPIs) comprehensively, plus a text and visual A3 poster report that described: the community's journey with the program; their thoughts on its effectiveness; outcomes they had recognised; and challenges and future needs relating to the program. Like others (Tsey 2000, p. 305), we found using the participants' own words and/or personal narratives in the report to be an effective way of not only helping 'outsiders' understand the local context, but also encouraged participants to feel a sense of ownership and pride in the report. Copies of the poster report were given to the community to provide them with a permanent record of the journey as well as a tool for learning, sharing, reflection and teaching (Tsey 2000, p. 306).

Building evaluation skills in the community

One important aspect where our evaluation lacked strength concerned the inability to build evaluation skills and capacity within the local community. This was not due to our disregard for the strategy. We agree with the Australasian Evaluation Society and others (Gray et al. 1995; Wehipeihana 2008, p. 42) that the opportunity for Aboriginal people to develop and strengthen their evaluation skills is important for encouraging shared ownership and benefit and project sustainability. In the past, however, we, like others, have found this practice easier said than done, particularly when working with remote communities (Berends & Roberts 2003, p. 57).

Some of our biggest challenges have been overcoming the legacy of historical suspicion of evaluation by Aboriginal people. This was 'whitefella business'. Additionally, we were challenged by the limited time available to develop relationships and skills, difficulties in knowing who to involve and how to seek interest, and a general uncertainty regarding

the logistics of such an approach. Nonetheless, we firmly believe capacity building is a mutually beneficial strategy. It is one we intend to pursue in our follow-up evaluation with the same community, with an effort to also learn from our past experiences.

2 What do Aboriginal people want evaluated and how might this be tackled?

It is impossible to answer what Aboriginal people want evaluated in relation to a specific project without them being involved from the outset, having some control over the process, and offered some investment in the results. Evaluators need to consider that some aspects that they think should be examined may be ones that Aboriginal people do not support—either because they find them culturally insensitive, too intrusive, irrelevant or perhaps too complex and difficult. In such cases, this means exploring alternatives that satisfy the needs of all those involved.

In relation to data collection, we reiterate that multiple site visits are critical to allow for adequate rapport building and contextual understanding. Beyond this, we have learnt that it is not helpful if evaluators are too prescriptive about particular methodologies at the project's outset. Rather, the methodological approach needs to be flexible and tailored to the project, the key questions being asked and the people involved. Influenced by local stakeholders' views on how they believe 'data' should be provided, this may mean being flexible in regard to particular evaluation approaches and choosing methods that engage critical issues. It may also mean educating funding bodies around the realities of 'data' and/or what participants believe is important to know.

Both qualitative and quantitative data can play a key role in telling a program's story, and a challenge for evaluators is to use each to complement the other. The use of creative qualitative methods such as art, music, games and role-play offer much value, as they can be both descriptive and flexible (Berends & Roberts 2003). They can also provide depth and context, thereby adding to the 'numbers' often sought by funding bodies. Similarly, statistics can provide objective and helpful baselines and comparison points against which change and improvement can be measured.

In our evaluation project, we used a multifaceted approach that involved analysis of program and community reports to provide the statistics, plus semi-structured interviews, art and photovoice to capture people's thoughts and feelings. As part of this latter process, both men and women were invited to draw or paint their 'story' of the program and then retell this story in their own words. Similar to Tsey (2000, p. 305), we found an important feature of such activity involved allowing people time to reflect and tell their story, and, in doing so, helping participants become aware of the changes the program had introduced into their lives.

We chose an art-based methodology because of our knowledge of the community's existing interest and comfort with such activity. The women

who participated were already engaging in other art activities, so our exercise became a voluntary extension of these activities. After confirming local protocols in relationship to ownership of the art, we offered willing participants the necessary art materials and invited them to take time to reflect and express their feedback creatively through drawing or painting. Others engaged in photovoice by using a camera to show what was important to them. The level of enthusiasm these activities generated and the speed at which locals responded (i.e. overnight) was testament to the effectiveness of such methods in this instance.

Finally, while using all these methods to enhance engagement, it was important for us to understand and respect local views and behaviours concerning different environments and spaces. As with Tsey (2000, p. 304), we recognised the importance of ensuring the environment in which the engagement took place was safe, supportive and informal. Beyond this, we needed to understand that separate defined spaces within the community existed for men, women, families, etc. For example, when interviewing young Aboriginal men, many of whom were uncomfortable meeting and sitting down in a formal office, we chose more open spaces where they could relax and chat more easily. These were typically places where men would often gather, and which were considered to be 'safe'. For women, different spaces that were specific and safe to them were also used.

3 How can non-Aboriginal evaluators respond to these issues effectively and respectfully during evaluations of Aboriginal programs?

The evaluation described in this article took us on a pathway that strayed from the original evaluation plan and framework and this required continuous learning from all stakeholders. There were also issues such as funding delays, a later-than-ideal commencement date and competing community agendas that impacted on the ability to conduct the evaluation—in particular, when trying to build local evaluation capacity and when attempting to provide feedback to communities in a timely manner. However, reflexive practices in the face of these barriers did allow the evaluation to proceed effectively and for the report to be disseminated to stakeholders. Through this process, there were a number of important learnings gained, including:

- The importance of 'before', 'during' and 'after', while recognising the challenges, often beyond our control, in truly respecting and implementing these stages, (particularly as the evaluation can often be viewed by the community to be less important than the ebb and flow of their daily life).
- The need to allow ample time for the community to understand the evaluation purpose and identify and engage with the key evaluation questions.

- The need to provide enough time for evaluator(s) to develop rapport with various community stakeholders and gain contextual knowledge.
- The critical need to engage community members from the outset through the trust and support of a sponsor. In doing so, evaluators can begin to gain cultural understanding and information about the context. More importantly though, locals need to have a say in how evaluations impacting on them should occur, and how, and if, the findings can be used to benefit the community.
- The importance of using flexible and creative methods such as art and photography for gaining local views and allowing local voices to be heard clearly, and complementing these methods with quantitative data and findings in order to provide funders with a more thorough and holistic picture.
- The importance and need to educate funders about realistic timings, cost, 'data' etc., and ultimately what is possible to achieve through an evaluation process.

Conclusion

Reflexive practices involve adaptability that can more effectively assist with the progression of evaluations. By allowing flexibility in timing, engagement, data collection and results dissemination, the evaluation process becomes a journey that evaluators and the community can take together. Hence, reflexive practices become an underlying theme in the idea of a framework for evaluating programs targeted to Aboriginal people. While it is very difficult to develop a specific framework that would be applicable to Aboriginal evaluations right across Australia due to different local cultures and contexts, we believe those engaged in the evaluation sector need to engage continually in reflexive practices and give thought to how we can synthesize these learnings into a discussion about how to carry out appropriate and valuable evaluations while engaging and working with, and among, Aboriginal people.

Notes

- 1 An earlier version of this article was presented at the Australasian Evaluation Society International Conference, Sydney, 29 August – 2 September 2011.
- 2 Intermediate labour market programs act as a bridge between unemployment and the mainstream labour market by providing temporary waged employment in a genuine work environment with ongoing support and training.
- 3 In this article we use the word 'Aboriginal' rather than 'Indigenous' as the people we have worked with use, and prefer to use, this term.

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