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Participatory evaluation: An intended catalyst to learning within university

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Abstract

Based on the meaning of participative evaluation as a collaborative inquiry process, the purpose of this study was to investigate the evaluation-related communication among the internal stakeholders of higher education process. The study employed a quantitative design with 235 participants from a Romanian public university. Data about evaluation-related communication were collected by a survey consisted of three main dimensions: the communication initiative, communication partners and the status of the persons participating to such a communication. The findings indicate communication-initiating vs. communication-responding role differences among participants, in the process of participatory evaluation of the quality of education programs, as characteristics of a collaborative inquiry process aiming to learning and change.

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1. Introduction

Participatory evaluation (PE) is a collaborative inquiry process among the emerging and innovative evaluation approaches such as collaborative, democratic-deliberative, empowerment, fourth-generation, inclusive and utilization-focused, explicitly endorsing the principle of stakeholder participation (Daigneault, Jacob, & Tremblay, 2012). Involving stakeholders in the evaluation process of planned change has become generally accepted within the evaluation community lately (Cousins 2003; Cullen, Coryn, & Rugh, 2011; Daigneault & Jacob, 2009; Mark 2001;

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Mathison, 2005; Poth & Shulha, 2008; Cousins & Whitmore, 1998). The benefits of stakeholder participation in evaluation are numerous, including creating opportunities for pooling resources, information, and data; anticipating reactions and problems; giving legitimacy and credibility to final decisions; and sharing risk and responsibility (Brandon, 1998; Campbell & Mark, 2006; Grant & Curtis, 2004; Orr, 2010; Posavac & Carey, 2007). Given the mentioned benefits, within the field of strategic change management, there is some evidence about a positive connection between participation and success of organizational change (Lines, 2005; Saksvik, Tvedt, Nytro, Andersen, Andersen, Buvik, & Torvatn, 2007). Although active client participation has been critical to organization development theory (Argyris, 1960; 1990; French & Bell, 1995) and process consulting (Schein, 1999), relatively little was studied how PE and the evaluation-related communication took place in the higher education organizations. The aim of the study was to investigate the evaluation-related communication among the main internal stakeholders of higher education process: students, academics and university administrators.

2. Theoretical framework

The main distinctive feature of PE is the creation of a dynamic process by the stakeholders, through which the social production of knowledge occurs, contributing to a collective conception of learning about themselves, the organization in which they are involved and ultimately the essential characteristics underlying the phenomena being evaluated (Suárez-Herrera, Springett & Kagan, 2009). This dialectical process consists of not only the consensus between different and often conflicting stakeholder perspectives, but also the development of a set of ongoing practices based on mutual interaction, cooperation, dialogue and negotiation (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998; Garaway, 1995; Gregory, 2000; Rebien, 1996; Springett, 2001; Suárez-Herrera et al., 2009). Going beyond the reconciliation of differences, an interactive learning environment is created in order to provide a common perspective for all the stakeholders involved in the evaluative process (Billett, 2004; Garaway, 1995).

Stakeholders are therefore continually engaged in a collective articulation of action working together, regardless of their organizational position, having creative capacities that allow them to get involved in a collective experience with all the senses, emotions and personal experiences that they bring with them (Garaway, 1995). Consequently, such an ongoing inquiry allows for both examination of underlying assumptions and dialogue (Garaway, 1995; Springett, 2001; Torres & Preskill, 2001) and has a profound impact on the ways in which stakeholders use their resources. This praxis implies a continual communication process integrated with the symbolic, physical and social infrastructures of the organization, through which its members negotiate their different values, attitudes and perceptions. Moreover, a sustainable network of stakeholders working together through communicative actions and supportive partnerships may come up and lead towards a political articulation of action (Suárez-Herrera et al., 2009).

The emergence of sustainable networks together with the partnerships developed among stakeholders rely on communication processes through which participants learn to reflect on their own experiences, mutual interactions and shared information (Brisolara, 1998; Burke, 1998; Cousins & Whitmore, 1998; Garaway, 1995; Springett, 2001). Nonetheless, House and Howe's (1999) critique regarding the power relations among the stakeholders moreover when these are internal stakeholders should be considered. Given the fact that the PE process is grounded in social and institutional authority structures within particular socio-political systems that inevitably influence the actors' involvement and their practices, the power relations may jeopardize the inclusion of all contributions in a deliberative process (House, 2004; House & Howe, 1999).

Internal stakeholders may have multiple value orientations depending on the position they have within organization. For example, program managers may have concerns about opening decision making to other members, including a general reluctance to work with others, fear of criticism or conflict, and reluctance to be transparent. On the other hand, other members within organization may have personal issues with other participants, may lack sufficient expertise, or may not have the time to commit to the PE process (Banta, 2005; Posavac & Carey, 2007).

Nevertheless, the communicative dimension of the participatory evaluation which comes from the sustained engagement of stakeholders in the organizational context of the evaluation process could be considered a precursor of a desired change process (Lines, 2005).

Considering the conceptualization of PE and the characteristics of the internal stakeholders as there were presented above, the present study investigates the evaluation-related communication within university as an

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