



Collaborative Evaluation within a framework of stakeholder-oriented evaluation approaches

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ABSTRACT

Collaborative Evaluation systematically invites and engages stakeholders in program evaluation planning and implementation. Unlike “distanced” evaluation approaches, which reject stakeholder participation as evaluation team members, Collaborative Evaluation assumes that active, on-going engagement between evaluators and program staff, result in stronger evaluation designs, enhanced data collection and analysis, and results that stakeholder understand and use. Among similar “participant-oriented” evaluation approaches (Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2011), Collaborative Evaluation distinguishes itself in that it uses a sliding scale for levels of collaboration. This means that different program evaluations will experience different levels of collaborative activity. The sliding scale is applied as the evaluator considers each program's evaluation needs, readiness, and resources. While Collaborative Evaluation is a term widely used in evaluation, its meaning varies considerably. Often used interchangeably with participatory and/or empowerment evaluation, the terms can be used to mean different things, which can be confusing. The articles use a comparative Collaborative Evaluation Framework to highlight how from a theoretical perspective, Collaborative Evaluation distinguishes itself from the other participatory evaluation approaches.

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1. Introduction

Collaborative Evaluation systematically invites and engages stakeholders in program evaluation planning and implementation. Unlike “distanced” evaluation approaches, which reject stakeholder participation as evaluation team members, Collaborative Evaluation assumes that active, on-going engagement between evaluators and program staff, result in stronger evaluation designs, enhanced data collection and analysis, and results that stakeholder understand and use.

As with any of the many evaluation approaches (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011), collaborative evaluation consistently follows typical program evaluation processes, whereby a client/supervisor/funder/program staff member is interested in asking questions about a program, which will require the systematic collection of information to answer those questions. In conducting the evaluation, a competent evaluator is expected to follow appropriate professional guidelines (see for example the *Guiding Principles for Evaluators* of the American Evaluation Association, *Evaluation Guidelines* from the International Program Evaluation Network, or the United Nations' *Standards for Evaluation*), which help to assure that the evaluation is of high quality. The collaborative aspect of the

evaluation is found in how the evaluators goes about conducting the evaluation, which includes a variety of efforts to engage program stakeholders in the evaluation.

Among similar “participant-oriented” evaluation approaches (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011), Collaborative Evaluation distinguishes itself in that it uses a sliding scale for levels of collaboration. This means that different program evaluations will experience different levels of collaborative activity. The sliding scale is applied as the evaluator considers each program's evaluation needs, readiness, and resources.

Rodriguez-Campos, another Collaborative Evaluation proponent wrote, “Collaborative Evaluation is an evaluation in which there is a significant degree of collaboration between the evaluator and stakeholders in the evaluation process” (2005, p. 1). Thus, a Collaborative Evaluation stance requires evaluators to enhance evaluation activities by creating environments that invite and allow stakeholder involvement. Additionally collaborative evaluators need to understand and assess barriers to collaboration and create opportunities to overcome them. All this must be done, cognizant of the evaluation being conducted and sensitive to the organizational context of the program.

2. Theoretical perspectives

While Collaborative Evaluation is a term widely used in evaluation, its meaning varies considerably. Often used interchangeably with participatory and/or empowerment evaluation,

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the terms can be used to mean different things, which can be confusing. The Topical Interest Group, representing evaluators following this “participant-oriented” approach in the American Evaluation Association, have entitled themselves, “Collaborative, Participatory, and Empowerment Evaluation.” Building on the existing literature contributed by members of this Topical Interest Group, Collaborative Evaluation is defined as an approach that actively engages program stakeholders as members of the evaluation team to the extent that they are able and willing. The work of O'Sullivan (2004) and Rodriguez-Campos (2005) best represent how such evaluation are planned and implemented.

From a broad, theoretical perspective, Collaborative Evaluation belongs on the use branch of evaluation theory as described by Alkin (2004) in *Evaluation Roots*, sharing much in common with participatory evaluation (Cousins & Earl, 1995; King, 2007; Whitmore, 1998), utilization-focused evaluation (Alkin, 2004; Patton, 2008), and empowerment evaluation (Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005). Consistent among these approaches are a strong appreciation for stakeholder involvement in evaluation and a desire for the evaluation results to be useful.

3. Aspects of evaluation

Because there is much overlap among the approaches, an effort to distinguish similarities and differences requires dimensions for comparison. For the purposes of this presentation these dimensions are referred to as “Aspects of Evaluation.” This section establishes the foundation for the inclusion of 11 aspects by which to compare the four approaches.

Essential aspects of evaluation include those components surrounding implementation. Because program evaluation presents an incredibly complex set of considerations for evaluators, beginning evaluators initially focus on the essential aspects of it that comprise the cyclical steps of conducting an evaluation – from the initial request for an evaluation to clarification of what is needed to designing and implementing the evaluation to summarizing information and reporting the results. Ideally this process repeats regularly so that programs benefit from the evaluation findings. While the number of steps differ among evaluation approaches and evaluators, there is almost universal agreement about this process sequence.

In addition to the nuts and bolts of evaluation, however, are more nuanced aspects of the effort that are concomitant with a program evaluation endeavor. Evaluative data may be collected from a distanced or engaged stance by internal and/or external evaluators. Evaluators may or may not consider the potential to enhance the capacity of program staff members to consume and conduct evaluation. Similarly, evaluators may or may not choose to consider the systemic role of the program in a broader context and its policy implications. Further, the importance of cultural competence to the endeavor is considered important. These and other aspects of evaluation are often what distinguish one evaluation approach from another.

In the mid 1990s evaluators who shared a common desire to work with and consider program stakeholders created the “Collaborative, Participatory, and Empowerment Evaluation” (CPE) topical interest group within the American Evaluation Association. During that time these evaluators began to expand current thinking around this evaluation approach, which had been pioneered by Stake (1967, 1983) and had a growing following of proponents. As of 2010, the CPE group was the third largest TIG with the organization. In 1994, Fetterman introduced Empowerment Evaluation, and in 1995, Cousins and Earl edited a book on Participatory Evaluation in education. The group was formalizing its components.

An important discussion was begun by Cousins and Earl (1995) and expanded by Cousins, Donohue, and Bloom (1996) when they contrasted different aspects of stakeholder-based evaluation along three dimensions: stakeholder selection for participation, control of evaluation technical decision-making, and depth of participation. Cousins and Whitmore (1998) then used these three dimensions to distinguish types of participatory evaluation along with a host of other collaborative inquiry methods (both evaluative and applied research). They also raised questions and issues around the aspects of power, ethics, participant selection, technical quality, cross cultural issues, training, and enabling conditions, saying that they hoped responses would emerge from sustained practice and reflection.

Evaluation as a field has expanded and matured in the last decade to include new ideas and refined concepts with slightly different terms and connotations. For example the “cross-cultural” aspect of evaluation identified by Cousins and Whitmore (1998) would now more commonly be referred to as “culturally responsive evaluation.” Their issue labeled, “training” would be akin today to “evaluation capacity building.”

In the past 10 years, the discussion around participant-oriented evaluations also has evolved from where it was in the 1990s. Proponents of these approaches have encountered new evaluation situations and from their experiences have refined their views, sharing the results of their practice thorough books, articles, and presentations (see for example: Fetterman, 2001; Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005, 2007; King, 2007; O'Sullivan, 2004; Rodriguez-Campos, 2005).

One can see the essential aspects of evaluation (i.e., evaluation design, implementation, analysis and reporting) and the subtler aspects of evaluation (e.g., engagement of stakeholders, policy implications, power of decision-making, etc.) as a framework by which to compare and contract Collaborative Evaluation to other participant-oriented approaches. This article identifies 11 aspects of evaluation, essential to Collaborative Evaluation, and then compares them with Participatory Evaluation, Empowerment Evaluation, and Utilization-Focused Evaluation. The hope is that from this theoretical perspective, the reader may understand how Collaborative Evaluation distinguishes itself from the other participant-oriented evaluation approaches.

4. Essential aspects of Collaborative Evaluation

The 12 essential aspects of Collaborative Evaluation used for this article are:

1. Primary Evaluation Focus;
2. Evaluation Decision-Making;
3. Stakeholder Roles;
4. Evaluator Roles,
5. Pre-Evaluation Clarification Activities;
6. Evaluation Design Orientation;
7. Type(s) of Data Collection Used;
8. Type(s) of Data Reporting;
9. Evaluation Capacity Building; and
10. Cultural Responsiveness and
11. Systems/Networking Considerations
12. Active Stakeholder Engagement in Evaluation Implementation;

These aspects were selected based on the literature, discussions and presentations at the annual meeting of the American Evaluation Association, and experience gained from more than 60 Collaborative Evaluation projects conducted during the last 10 years. These aspects seemed to best distinguish how Collaborative Evaluation might contrast with the other participant-oriented

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