



The need for theory evaluation in global citizenship programmes: The case of the GCSA programme



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ABSTRACT

Many education programmes lack a documented programme theory. This is a problem for programme planners and evaluators as the ability to measure programme success is grounded in the plausibility of the programme's underlying causal logic. Where the programme theory has not been documented, conducting a theory evaluation offers a foundational evaluation step as it gives an indication of whether the theory behind a programme is sound. This paper presents a case of a theory evaluation of a Global Citizenship programme at a top-ranking university in South Africa, subsequently called the GCSA Programme. This evaluation highlights the need for documented programme theory in global citizenship-type programmes for future programme development. An articulated programme theory produced for the GCSA Programme, analysed against the available social science literature, indicated it is comparable to other such programmes in terms of its overarching framework. What the research found is that most other global citizenship programmes do not have an articulated programme theory. These programmes also do not explicitly link their specific activities to their intended outcomes, making demonstrating impact impossible. In conclusion, we argue that taking a theory-based approach can strengthen and enable outcome evaluations in global citizenship programmes.

1. Introduction

The ultimate success of any programme is largely recognised as contingent on its design and the plausibility of its underlying logic (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004). From a programme evaluators' perspective, articulating a programme's theory can be considered a logical first step in the programme design process. Bickman (1987) defines programme theory in evaluation as "a plausible and sensible model of how a programme is supposed to work" (p. 5). The foundational importance of programme theory in the evaluation process is indicated in Rossi et al.'s (2004) step-wise, hierarchical model of programme evaluation, which has the assessment of the programme design and theory as second only to establishing the need for the programme. As a result of conducting a programme theory evaluation, the programme's underlying causal theory would be articulated and act as a reference point to assess whether this conceptualisation of what will be undertaken during a given programme can lead to the planned changes in the participants that it was designed to bring about (Chen, 2005; Rossi et al., 2004). Due to the focus on causal linkages, many programme theories are depicted using a mostly linear logical approach illustrating linked chains of causes and effects (Donaldson, 2007; Rossi et al., 2004)

Education programmes, however, often do not have a documented programme theory (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Leming, 2000). This lack is a problem for evaluators as the ability to measure the likelihood of success of a programme is grounded in the programme's underlying theory and causal logic.

An important terminological distinction that is relevant, especially in relation to education programmes for both a programme evaluation and programme implementation audience, is the difference between programme theory and learning theory or pedagogical approach. Pedagogy in a given education programme would outline the theory around how it may be best to teach the planned set of concepts to be covered to maximise learning and how the various topics build towards the final planned learning outcomes. As such, a pedagogical approach focuses on the interactions between the teachers and learners that aim to enhance learning (Watkins & Mortimore, 1999). Learning outcomes refer to specific knowledge and skills that learners should be able to demonstrate that they have gained by the end of the education programme (e.g. students will be able to listen actively). In contrast, the programme theory outlines what the overall programme activities are and considers whether the linkages between these programme activities

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and the planned programme outcomes are logical. This theory can also provide an indication of the process by which these programme outcomes are achieved. Programme outcomes provide an indication of the changes expected to result through the programme activities (e.g. improved capacity for leadership). In education programmes, proximal programme outcomes could bring together several learning outcomes. Programme outcomes can also manifest after the end of a programme. For example, exploring the programme theory should allow us to answer questions such as, for example: Will students attending a debate series result in the programme outcome of producing engaged and active global citizens and by what process will this occur? Pedagogical approach and learning outcomes, therefore, provide an important foundation for articulating a programme theory but do not present the whole picture in themselves. As such, the programme theory can be thought of as encapsulating the pedagogical approach and the learning outcomes providing the scaffolding on which the programme outcomes are built.

Where a programme has not articulated its underlying programme theory, conducting a theory evaluation can help evaluators and programme planners to develop a clear understanding of the programme and how it should function (Bickman, 1987). Articulating this understanding enables a shared awareness among programme stakeholders. A theory evaluation gives an important indication of whether the theory behind the programme is sound and whether the programme could be expected to achieve the desired results if implemented appropriately (Chen, 2016; Donaldson, 2007; Rossi et al., 2004; Weiss, 1998). Conducting a robust theory and design evaluation is a necessary step in evaluation practice because it provides a good foundation for future process and implementation, outcome and impact as well as cost and efficiency evaluations (Rossi et al., 2004). Theory evaluations can also assist programme planners in improving programme design, using evidence from what has worked in other programmes to guide changes. As such, programme theory-based approaches are fundamental to inform and improve programme practices.

Many useful programme evaluations are conducted at the implementation, outcome and cost and cost efficiency levels (Bickman, 1987; Rossi et al., 2004). These evaluations can provide an indication of whether a programme is successful without a focus on the programme's underlying theory. They do, however, have the limitation of not necessarily being able to explain the why and how of success or failure. For example, a problem with the programme design would be unlikely to be identified through evaluations that do not contain an assessment of the programme theory. Programme theory, whether or not it has been articulated, is foundational to the way a programme was implemented and how potential outcomes may emerge and be measured. As such, providing an explicit articulation of the programme theory underlying a programme is essential to uncovering the why and how of its successes and failures most appropriately.

This paper illustrates the case of a theory and design evaluation of a Global Citizenship programme at a top-ranking university in South Africa (subsequently called the GCSA Programme). The theory evaluation which extracted and articulated this programme's theory and analysed it against the social science literature is presented. This is, to the authors' knowledge, the first published analysis of its kind for global citizenship programmes. This analysis aimed to identify the causal links between the articulated activities and their related outcomes as well as assess the programme against current practice in the field. Using a theory-based approach in the context of an ongoing and popular higher education (HE) programme, this evaluation highlights implications for practice in both evaluation and programme design of global citizenship programmes internationally. The GCSA Programme's context and description is presented below.

1.1. Evaluation setting: the GCSA Programme in context

The university's Higher Education Development (HED) centre,

which focuses on academic development at the institution, recognised that many graduating students lack an understanding of global and citizenship topics that go beyond their degree courses. The university executive saw the GCSA programme as a mechanism to respond to one of the university's revised strategic objectives, which was to underpin the qualifications with values of social justice and engaged citizenship. The GCSA Programme was thus implemented through the HED centre in 2010 to meet this need. The outcome of engaged citizenship in the GCSA programme is expected to be achieved through the programme objectives which are (McMillan, Small, Tame, van Heerden, & von Kotze, 2010 pp. 2–3):

- To expose students to a broad foundational knowledge on issues relating to global citizenship and social justice that go beyond the immediate requirements of their professional degree or major discipline;
- To develop students' capacity for leadership in contemporary global-political and social justice issues through improving their active listening, critical thinking and logical argument skills; and
- To promote students' awareness of themselves as future citizens of the world with a motivation to work for social justice through involvement in community service/volunteering.

Although the programme had clear objectives and aims, as with many programmes, the evaluand had no explicitly articulated programme theory prior to the evaluation reported in this paper. In addition, no previous evaluation had been conducted on the programme.

1.1.1. Programme description: the GCSA Programme's approach and design

The GCSA Programme provides students with a guided and reflective opportunity to think about themselves in the context of the world and about global issues within their local context. While registered students at any stage of their studies can enrol in the programme, the GCSA Programme is largely aimed at senior undergraduates (2nd and 3rd year)¹ as well as postgraduates in the early phase of their degree (4th year). As at December 2015, approximately 200 students per year had passed through the various modules of this programme.

The GCSA Programme was designed to be co-curricular, which places it outside of, but complementary, to the core curriculum. The programme is presented outside of core university teaching hours. The programme adopts a blended learning approach with various module activities taking place on the campus as well as online via the Learning Management System (LMS), which are moderated by programme tutors. The LMS forums are a core platform for students to engage with one another, debate various ideas and answer questions both before and between sessions. The tutors also facilitate classroom and community service sessions and activities (Global Citizenship Programme (GC Programme), 2012). The tutors also meet for regular mentoring and feedback sessions with the course coordinator (GC Programme, 2012).

The GCSA programme is designed according to an adult education approach which involves putting the student at the centre of the learning process and provides them with the tools to take action as engaged global citizens (Von Kotze & Small, 2013). This process is based on the engaged and critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire (Freire, 1972). An assumption underlying the programme is that the students want to learn and so will take responsibility for their learning. The programme staff facilitate the process of learning to respond to the participants' needs (Von Kotze & Small, 2013). This facilitated process revolves around activities that help the students develop reflection, debate and volunteering skills, and begin to think critically about how they engage with the world around them (Global Citizenship Programme (GC Programme), 2013; McMillan, 2013). The

¹ Most undergraduate degrees at South African universities are designed to be completed after three years.

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