Developing a culture of evaluation

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Abstract
What is evaluation? Why would it have a culture? What are the implications of a culture of evaluation? Why would an institution want to develop such a culture? What would it take to develop the culture? When answering these questions, it becomes apparent that evaluation is a broad notion which covers a range from inspection to action research and that, however it is conceived, evaluation leaves no one and no institution indifferent. The goal may be to monitor what is done in an institution such as a school, or to attempt to learn from what is done there. The conduct of evaluation may be the domain of a small group of specialists inside or outside the institution or part of its general activity. The outcome may be perceived as negligible, harmful or beneficial or all of these at once. Evaluation has the potential to be useful to individuals and institutions. It follows, then, that the way evaluation is conceived, introduced and managed must be thought through carefully.

Introduction

Few people recognise, when asked, that the organisation they work in has a culture of evaluation. It would appear that the term is assumed to have a particular meaning, referring to something special rather than a general experience. After a little reflection, it becomes clear that every organisation such as a school, college or university has a culture of evaluation. These are organisations where judgements, and decisions based on them, are made all the time. The most evident use of evaluation in education is assessment of learners, and the information from this may decide awards, progress, streaming or an end to studies. Within the institution, evaluation of teachers may be less evident, not formal or structured, but students and colleagues always know who the "good" teachers are. The organisation may not have a policy about evaluation, but it will have a culture, a way of doing and using, or not using, evaluation.

References to "culture of evaluation" are rare, but when they are made, they carry a special sense (e.g. Aspinwall et al. 1992). When people claim that their organisation has an evaluation culture (and this may apply in many kinds of organisation, not just in educational organisations), then they usually mean that all members of the organisation:
  • accept the use of evaluation;
  • understand why the organisation uses evaluation;
  • can design or get advice on design of necessary evaluations;
  • use evaluation, particularly to support change and development.
In other words, they refer to a known, shared policy about evaluation within the organisation.

What do you need to think about and learn about if you and your colleagues are to create such a policy, and develop a culture of evaluation? Taking what has just been said, this implies effective, structured, accepted use of evaluation, to support change and development in the organisation. In order to discuss such development we need to look at what we mean by evaluation, and consider a few of the reasons why evaluation creates and is part of a culture. If the notion of an "evaluation culture" has a particular definition, and not several, we need to

consider the implications of such a specific element for the culture of the institution. We may ask why anyone would want an evaluation culture, and if this is judged to be a worthwhile development, then we need to understand what it takes to produce and support an evaluation culture.

What is evaluation?

Put simply, evaluation is finding out about an activity to see either how well it is being done, how effective it is, or to understand it better. In other words, evaluation is a kind of research, but is not an end in itself. It is a tool of management, whether organisational or classroom management, and is pointless if its findings are not used. Evaluation may be done to monitor people's job performance, or the achievement of programme goals. Typically we experience this kind of evaluation as some form of inspection, but evaluation is also done by teachers: to learn from or about classroom activity, or to support innovation and development. Evaluations may be small- or large-scale, and use a range of techniques: diary-keeping, classroom observation, testing, experiments, case-study, and interviews. The appropriacy of the technique will depend on the purpose and context of the evaluation, and there are several handbooks, not necessarily marked as concerned with "evaluation", to guide would-be evaluator teachers (e.g. Altrichter et al. 1993, Bell 1993, Patton 1987, Richards & Lockhart 1994). There are also various accounts of evaluations which show what teachers achieve when using evaluation (Bailey & Nunan 1996, Rea-Dickins & Lwaitama 1993, Rea-Dickins & Germaine 1998).

Why does evaluation have a culture?

If, as was suggested, all organisations have an evaluation culture, then we might expect to find a variety of cultures, and not a unitary perception. Different attitudes towards evaluation would be indicative of different cultures, and beneath these we may begin to identify different elements which influence the attitude, and which, depending on how they function, make up the culture.

As in other areas of our lives, experience colours perception. Experiences of evaluation are never neutral because evaluation impinges on the ways in which groups and organisations work, on established, often unspoken, values. A common attitude is that evaluation is threatening, where the term has become forever redolent of associated bad experiences. A harsh, but far from unique example of inspection will illustrate this. "Evaluazion" was the term used after the reunification of Germany for assessment of a teacher's job performance in the former GDR, where the sole purpose was to reduce the size of the workforce. So for many of those who were affected, even when they kept their job, the term is forever negative in its connotations. In another example, a university administration gets students to evaluate lecturers and then uses the findings, secretly, to decide on promotion or firing. Another experience which fosters negative attitudes is that of doing evaluation for no purpose, where a lot of effort goes into gathering information which is then either not used or ignored, so that those involved feel that their time was wasted, and they conclude that evaluation is not a necessary part of management.

Positive attitudes seem to be less widespread, which may tell us something about the use and experience of evaluation. It can defuse conflict and point to solutions, as when a group of final-year trainee teachers were criticised by their established colleagues for their use of the first language in class. The regular teachers also contravened the norm of only using the target

language in class, but criticised the trainees because they were scholarship-holders being trained overseas. Evaluation pinpointed the specific uses made of the first language and brought out some of the attitudes which complicated the issue. Knowing what was going on made it possible to identify solutions (Murphy 1991). For those with similar experiences, evaluation becomes useful and beneficial, points which we return to below.

A comment from an anonymous French secondary teacher of English in 1982 picks up the negative connotations, and points to some of the key elements of the culture. The comment came in an evaluation I carried out three months after a short course:

> We wasted a lot of time about evaluation which turned out to be a sort of political debate with a lot of bias and prejudice. Evaluation for French teachers is a sort of Loch Ness Monster, they are afraid to consider testing and evaluating with new eyes (positively) they like to be **powerful** and decide what is good or bad. Their only aim is to **select** pupils not to show them the progress they are able to make.

As this teacher said, evaluation is political, its use is part of policy and, therefore, of how we are to do things. It is to do with information and, if we use this, with power. In top-down evaluation such as inspection, the information is about you and me and how we do our work and the results of our work. In top-down evaluation such as testing, the information is about the pupils, and, as the teacher points out, the knowledge this provides also gives power because of the use the teacher can make of it. In defining the power mechanism associated with evaluation we need to examine:

- who does the evaluation?
- who gets and uses the knowledge?
- how much institutional power do these people have?
- what is the culture of communication in the organisation?

These questions point to the fact that anyone in the organisation could do evaluation, that the results and use of evaluation may be clear or secret, that decisions based on results may or may not be taken at the appropriate level of the hierarchy, with or without consultation. In other words, more than one evaluation culture is possible, but what is certain is that evaluation has an impact on how we do things and how things are done to us.

What are the implications of a culture of evaluation for the institution?
If you and your organisation do not do the kind of evaluation sketched out in the introduction, then a move towards such evaluation implies changes in individual and organisational culture, altering "the way we do things round here", changing values and shifting the power differential. A simple but effective model of organisational culture proposes four basic types: the bureaucratic hierarchy, a leader with favourites, a goal-oriented team, a loose grouping of prima donnas (Handy 1985). In reality an organisation may have a mixture of these, and the different cultures may all be appropriate for particular groups at particular times. What appears most important today is each culture's general capacity for change and adaptation. The second and third types are more likely to have this, and to accept and use the kind of evaluation culture proposed here.

This evaluation culture supposes that teachers and other "insiders" (that is stakeholders within the organisation rather than from within the broader system) make use of evaluation and are able to

discuss their findings with other members whatever their relative power within the organisation. They will also discuss findings, where relevant, outside the institution. In this way the power of decision-making passes to the level of implementation and action, although consultation will draw on the opinions of those at other levels. A major focus of such evaluation will be on development and learning, but review and accountability will not be neglected, and developmental evaluation will usually contribute to these (Mackay 1994).

The experience of such an evaluation culture is that it is democratising for those in the organisation. It will not function unless communication takes the form of dialogue, where all sides listen and speak. It may redistribute power, as it expects more open access to information and open decision-making. Goals become open to question and discussion, while change is participative and not simply imposed top-down, an invariably unsuccessful way to lead change. It means that the institution and its members have a mutual commitment to its and their development. For teachers this means moving from the lone wolf culture to opening the classroom door and freely admitting others; it also implies a commitment to their own professional development. The students, who may be the most conservative of the stakeholders in the institution, must not be left out of these considerations. Like the others, they need to learn about, understand and want the new culture. This brief sketch is ideal, and many effective changes can be achieved without implementing everything precisely as it is described here. However, most of these elements are critical to a participative evaluation culture.

Why would anyone want to develop an evaluation culture?
Evaluation is certainly a vogue term and activity in the late 1990s (which does not mean it is either a passing fad or of little use). National evaluation societies have been established in a number of European countries, though not in France, where one effort failed (Ambrois 1998), perhaps because in the view of French evaluators they still lack an evaluation culture (Martin 1998). Nevertheless, the administration is making greater use of evaluation, where it often has a formal role in policy making, and there is awareness of the need to develop qualitative evaluation (Lott 1998). "Partenarial (sic) evaluation" in the regions is growing (Ambrois 1998), and may provide a general, social pressure to generate the missing evaluation culture.

There are additional positive reasons to be interested in an evaluation culture, to be found in the experience of those who have developed one (Murphy 1996). These were identified through research and are grouped under three headings:
> 1 Personal benefits: renewed interest in teaching; better relations with colleagues and students (trust); increased confidence.
> 2 Professional benefits: new and improved skills; more effective interpretation and implementation of the curriculum; ability to develop.
> 3 Institutional benefits: co-operation; learning organisation; student experience; quality assurance.

Even though these findings are separated, we may note how the personal benefits are equally of value to the institution. The personal and professional benefits are difficult to separate when, for example, they include better time management (because you do not get time allocated to doing evaluation, you have to find time to include it in your practice). Such evaluation empowers teachers and helps them work as reflective practitioners, enabling them to bridge technical and

practical knowledge (Ellis 1997). It also makes the institution a learning organisation, one which "facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself" (Pedler et al. 1991 in Aspinwall et al. 1992:229).

What does it take to develop an evaluation culture?

All studies of business and educational organisations stress the influence and role of the person at the top in managing change, and in creating a learning organisation. The success rate of educational change judged against its targets is depressingly low; often schools and universities only achieve superficial change, while their members appear capable of much more:

> "There are too many instances in which organisations know less than their members. There are even cases in which the organisation cannot seem to learn what everybody knows" (Argyris & Schön 1978 in Aspinwall et al. 1992).

Support from the top, then, will be crucial to working towards change, particularly if it is only within one department, which by making change is stepping out of line with the general culture.

The following points are offered as considerations and guidelines for strategy:

• Encourage patience and leadership, because the process will take time and needs someone to keep the goals in view and to direct effort. It must be clear to everyone what change is being proposed.

• Review the current position against what you want to achieve. What's being done already? Who's interested? What resources are there? What are the goals? You need to be sure that the change is compatible with what teachers and students perceive as the needs of the classroom and social context.

• Analyse the adaptability of the members and the institution to achieve culture change. What is the culture of the institution? How much change do the goals imply?

• Calculate the resources of time and money for training and leading the change. Training is a key variable in successful implementation of change.

• Acknowledge that learning new skills and changing culture will produce errors, so it is important to have ways to recognise achievement and progress in order to sustain change. Evaluation should help you to learn from errors.

• Establish co-ordination, which is needed to manage the processes of learning and of evaluation.

• Put into place effective communication, which is the foundation of the culture change. It must include consultation and reporting, communication of what is going on, what is found, and what is decided.

• Anticipate conflict and rejection, and allow people to express these, otherwise the doubters will not be won over to the group who own the change. Teacher attitudes will make or break the change.

Using evaluation and helping other people learn to use evaluation have convinced me it is worth developing this kind of evaluation culture, most of all because we can then take care of our motivation and effectiveness as teachers. The learning organisations, where you can confidently talk about an evaluation culture and see its benefits, are rare. Individuals with their own evaluation culture are more common, but may be marginalised. The benefits discussed here are neither total nor guaranteed, and several teachers and organisations have rejected or failed to

achieve the evaluation culture described. Where the culture is established, it has to be passed on, maintained and developed. The individuals and organisations who manage this say that it is worthwhile because of the trust and confidence that are produced as they face and cope with forces for change and take charge of their own progress.

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