Chapter 6

Evaluating practice

In Chapter One we argued that informal education is future orientated, concerned with development and growth. Therefore, as educators we must foster learning that aids this. Looking towards the future and planning is vital but this must take place alongside reflection on what has happened. If we are concerned about the quality and effectiveness of our practice we must constantly reflect upon and monitor our work. That means asking questions such as 'Am I doing this right?' 'Did what I say help or hinder learning?' 'Why did today seem a success but last night so flat?' 'Why is X being driven from the group, and should I do something about it?' Questions such as these constantly occur to a good practitioner. They arise before, after, and during every session.

Usually we 'discuss' such questions with ourselves (with or without moving our lips!) Often we talk them through with colleagues, friends and partners. These conversations on the phone or face-to-face may seem casual and unfocussed but they are vital. They are a means by which we evaluate and make sense of our work. Wise educators will take care to cultivate a network of people with whom they can share their work. Some will understand informal education and can contribute to the process of evaluation from a shared perspective. Others may offer valuable insights based on their work in other settings and traditions. All will need to be trustworthy - people with whom serious as well as trivial concerns can be shared. No one can, or

should, create such a network for us. It is our responsibility to establish our own.

Asking and answering questions like those mentioned earlier is what evaluation is about. It is something that is going on all the time and should not be just a one-off event. We monitor what is happening, as it is happening. In other words, we reflect as we work. This involves evaluation - making judgements and putting a value on things. As a result, we are able to respond in more appropriate ways to situations.

Evaluation, in its original Latin sense, meant to strengthen. In recent years, evaluation has often come to mean something else. It has become a tool of funders wanting to judge what is 'successful', what 'works' and what should or should not be invested in. Rather than being an integral part of educating, this type of evaluation is more concerned with counting and comparing. Such approaches are usually enforced from outside. Their implementation is entrusted to imported consultants - men and women employed to tell others whether what they are doing is right or wrong. It is an approach that takes little or no account of the ongoing evaluation that is intrinsic to conversation. It also changes the nature of the questions, and usually appeals to different values and interests. This is why we must always ask whose values and judgements shape the questions being asked? In this short chapter we want to explore what evaluation is appropriate for informal educators.

Three approaches to evaluation

Three broad approaches to evaluation are commonly found within informal education practice. Educators will often have to work with all three.

Directed evaluation. In this approach external agents, often funders, set criteria. The focus is largely upon measurable outcomes and outputs. It is chiefly used as a tool of management and control. Comparisons are made between agencies and workers. The methods used are designed to measure 'efficiency', 'effectiveness' and 'value for money'.

The result is often the creation of conformity as agencies and workers strive to 'deliver' the required outputs and outcomes. It also fuels competition, the fabrication of results, and the rejection of 'unprofitable customers' in order to sustain funding. Examples of this approach are commonplace in education and health services. Some of the most visible signs of its use are league tables, funding report forms and inspection reports.

Negotiated evaluation. Here the judgements regarding practice are made according to criteria agreed between the different parties involved. Management committees, funders, workers and participants may all make some contribution to deciding what is to be evaluated and how. There is debate and discussion, although not all may be involved in everything. The criteria and the method are not imposed by outside bodies and can vary from situation to situation. However, they are set out in advance. The methods can be close to those used in directed evaluation. Apart from collecting data (about, for example, the number of people using a facility) this approach commonly involves evaluation forms and questionnaires.

Dialogical evaluation. This approach places the responsibility for evaluation on educators and participants. Its purpose is to enrich practice and it is part and parcel of practice. We seek conversations that focus on issues concerning the value of people's experiences and learning. This entails engaging with people to describe experiences, explore meanings, confront issues, and reconstruct practice.[41] As part of the daily round of working, we encourage people to look at what they have learnt and their experiences of learning. We listen to what they are saying (and not saying) and also reflect upon our own experiences. We ask questions or make suggestions so that people may develop their abilities to evaluate their own experiences. At the same time we may invite them to join with us in making judgements

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[41] John Smyth (1993) *Teachers as Collaborative Learners*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

about the work. For much of this time this is not planned and does not make use of formal tools. It twists and develops through conversation. This means it can take some unravelling - and hence the place for recording and exploring things with others. More formal activities are also often necessary to stimulate reflection. These can range from the production of annual reports, through things like focus groups, to residentials and business meetings. The keynotes are dialogue and the exercise of democratic power. This approach involves the making of decisions by those directly involved (and who also have to live with the consequences of their actions).

The timing of evaluation is significant. Evaluations undertaken during the lifetime of a project or a piece of work are often described as formative. Their purpose is to help make decisions about our next step or strategy. This contrasts with evaluations taking place on completion of pieces of work. These are often called summative. They look back and review what has been done; they literally 'sum up'. Such evaluation is often required by funders and linked to whether targets have been met. In practice both forms of evaluation can run together - a summative judgement being used to plan new work.

Problems in evaluating informal education

In recent years informal educators have been put under great pressure to provide 'output indicators', 'qualitative criteria', 'objective success measures' and 'adequate assessment criteria'. Those working with young people have been encouraged to show how young people have developed 'personally and socially through participation'.[42] As we shall

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[42] Questions raised in this section are discussed at greater length in Tony Jeffs and Mark K. Smith (1999) 'Informal education and health promotion' in E. R. Perkins, I. Simnett and L. Wright (eds.) *Evidence-Based Health Promotion*, Chichester: John Wiley. The quote is from OFSTED (1997) *The Contribution of Youth Services to Drug Education*, London: Stationery Office.

see, the forms of evaluation used in the formal education sector and in most other areas pose problems for informal educators.

First, the different things that influence the way people behave can't be easily broken down. For example, an informal educator working with a project to reduce teen crime on two estates might notice that the one with a youth club open every weekday evening has less crime than the estate without such provision. But what will this variation, if it even exists, prove? It could equally be explained by differences in the ethos of local schools, policing practices, housing, unemployment rates, and the willingness of people to report offences.

Second, those who may have been affected by the work of informal educators are often not easily identified. It may be possible to list those who have been worked with directly over a period of time. However, much contact is sporadic and may even take the form of a single encounter. The indirect impact is just about impossible to quantify. Our efforts may result in significant changes in the lives of people we do not work with. This can happen as those we work with directly develop. Consider, for example, how we reflect on conversations that others recount to us, or ideas that we acquire second- or third-hand. Good informal education aims to achieve a ripple effect. We hope to encourage learning through conversation and example and can only have a limited idea of what the true outcome might be.

Third, change can rarely be monitored even on an individual basis. For example, informal educators who focus on alcohol abuse within a particular group can face an insurmountable problem if challenged to provide evidence of success. They will not be able to measure use levels prior to intervention, during contact or subsequent to the completion of their work. In the end all the educator will be able to offer, at best, is vague evidence relating to contact or anecdotal material.

Fourth, there is an issue with timescales. Change of the sort with which informal educators are concerned does not happen overnight. Changes in values, and the ways that people come to appreciate themselves and others, are

notoriously hard to identify - especially as they are happening. What may seem ordinary at the time can, with hindsight, be recognized as special.

Last, we encounter the thorny topic of candour within evaluation. The growth of the audit culture with its concern that everything public servants do must be measured and assessed to ensure 'value for money' has created a cascade of forms and returns. These accumulate information regarding how we spend our time, where we go, who we meet and what we do. The justification for all this bureaucracy is that it rewards success and penalises failure, identifies 'good practice' and encourages efficiency. Whether it actually does these things is another question. It certainly costs a great deal in terms of the time and effort of face-to-face workers. For example a detached youth work project studied by one of the writers now allows 30 minutes out of each two and a half hour session for workers to complete the required returns. That is in addition to the time set aside for staff to discuss amongst themselves how the session went. Bureaucracy consumes 20 per cent of the part-time staff budget. The same project had two full-time workers and a four-day a week administrator who only handled returns, funding applications and other paper work. It was estimated less than half the full-time staffing budget 'funded' face-to-face contact time.

In tandem with the audit culture we have the escalating use by funders of payment-by-results. This demands that informal educators 'deliver' measured outcomes as a condition of payment. Community centre users must be pressurised into completing NVQs of dubious value; youth club members Youth Achievement Awards; and parents popping into the children's or parents' centre must prove they come from a deprived area if the funding targets are to be achieved. So "where do you live?" not "would you like a cup of tea?" becomes the must-ask opening gambit. Of course much of this counting and measuring has little to do with 'value for money' or generating efficiency. Rather it justifies a top-heavy management layer, teaches the minions to 'know their place' and cultivates a climate of fear that ensures compliance with instructions from 'up-the-line'.

Inevitably, as all parties are aware but many cannot admit, this leads to dishonesty. Money, unchallenged, will leech out all other values unless we are alert to the danger - and we are not taking sufficient care to ensure that does not occur. A conspiracy of silence pervades the sector. Just as many schools fiddle their SATs and attendance returns to improve their league table positions, so informal educators are tempted to tweak the evaluation process to protect their funding and keep the inspectors happy.

The evaluation and audit culture is a canker, propagating dishonesty and punishing the honest. It erodes the self-respect of practitioners and corrodes our relationship with those we seek to work with. They are not so stupid as to be unaware they are being manipulated and managed to attain externally imposed outcomes and outputs - outcomes they never consented to and care not a fig for. They also learn that when measured outcomes are the order of the day conversation, argument and debate become viewed as a risky diversion. Discussion is to be avoided as it diverts the staff's attention from what has become their central task - achieving a good score, a high rating. The audit culture and the payment by results regime actively discourage the unplanned and spontaneous. They are intolerant of autonomy and what cannot be measured. They worm their way into the sphere of informal relationships and stimulate a disposition towards conformity and passivity.

So how can informal education be evaluated?

Because evaluation is difficult does not mean we should ignore or avoid it. Rather we must find ways of evaluating our work that are compatible with our values and concern to foster democracy and association. This inevitably means that dialogue and conversation will be at the heart of our evaluative efforts.

As well as considering the methods, we also need to be thinking about what is to be evaluated. Here we might be asking questions about:

- **Interactions**. What are the characteristics of these? What purposes did they serve? What initiated them? To what extent were they educative? Are they sustained? Do they reflect the sort of values we are seeking to encourage?
- **Focus**. What issues and topics form the focus for conversation? Which of these are initiated by us, and which by others? What are the most common subjects or concerns?
- **Setting**. Where is the work undertaken? What physical settings best stimulate conversation? What is the impact of the setting upon subject matter, the nature of those worked with, and the quality of interaction?
- **Aims**. What were we as educators aiming to achieve? What were the aims of others? Were there conflicts between the two?
- **Strategies**. How did we, as educators, plan to achieve our aims? Who set these? What moves did we make? How, if at all, were they altered and who influenced this? What strategies did others have? How did they change?
- **Outcomes**. Were outcomes set, and if so by whom? What appeared to be the outcome for different participants? What did we learn from our engagement? Are there issues and questions we need to address? Who needs to know about these?

By considering these - and how they relate to each other - we can begin to judge or value events and experiences. We do this by looking to our understanding of what makes for human flourishing and our role (see *Figure 5.3*). We then have some basis upon which to make decisions about our next step or to plan strategies.

The above discussion focuses on the dialogue between participants and educators. It places these at the centre of the evaluation. There are, however, third parties that may be interested in the outcome of any evaluation – funders, managers and inspectors. Although we would argue it is inappropriate for dialogical evaluation to be tailored to meet their expectations (this would warp the process), educators

should be mindful of these. Therefore, it may necessary for educators to undertake parallel evaluations that supply the 'evidence' funders and others require. In this way, educators may be involved in dialogical, negotiated and directed evaluations at the same time.

In conclusion

For educators the primary interest should always be the quality of the learning experience and how it may enhance, or inhibit, well-being. Evaluation is part of everyday practice and helps us to sustain our focus. It is not the mere counting and measuring of things, but involves the difficult task of valuing. We have to make judgements about the 'rightness' of actions.

Some questions to consider

1. What do you do to evaluate your work? What do others do to evaluate your work? Are these compatible?

2. Can you think of ways in which statistics might be collected with regard to your work which would tell you and others what you are doing?

3. 'All you do is stand around and natter', says a friend who regularly collects you from work. How might you produce evidence to show that this is not all that you do?

Follow up

There are several things you can do to deepen your exploration of evaluating practice.

Visit the 'evaluating practice' support page at www.infed.org/foundations for further discussion, examples, activities and links.

Read Angela Everitt and Pauline Hardiker's chapter 'The purposes of evaluation' in their (1996) book *Evaluating for Good Practice,* London: Macmillan, pages 19-36. The book explores a critical approach to evaluation.

Read E. Leslie Sewell (1966) *Looking at Youth Clubs,* London: National Association of Youth Clubs. A classic pamphlet exploring how to make judgements about youth work. Available online via the support page.

Read Marie Paneth (1944) *Branch Street: A Sociological Study,* London: George Allen and Unwin. This wonderful account of an action-research project undertaken with young people in a poor London neighbourhood can be read as an almost perfect example of evaluation-in-practice. Paneth continually reflects on her work and relationships with colleagues, the community and the young people with whom she works. Find out more about Paneth and 'Branch Street' on the support page.