



Evaluation Tips #35

Participatory Evaluation

What is it? Participatory evaluation provides for the active involvement of those with a stake in the program: participants, program staff, board members, community members, partners, sponsors, etc.

Key features

- Participant focus and ownership
- Collaborative process
- Inclusive, diversity of views
- Learning process
- Flexible design
- Multiple methods
- Joint responsibility and shared control

Quick Tip # 35

True participatory evaluation is in the hands of the participants, not the program staff, evaluator, sponsors, or outside source. This can empower participants but requires commitment of the organization.

Participatory evaluation evolves. It cannot be fully determined in advance. Evaluation indicators or guidelines dictated by funder/sponsor/agency limit participation and input.

In participatory evaluation, roles change. The “evaluator” is not the “expert”, but instead is a facilitator, teacher, collaborator, reflective practitioner, a participant in the process.

Stakeholders participate actively in all phases of the evaluation, not just at particular points, for example when generating evaluation questions and interpreting data. The later might be more appropriately defined as “stakeholder evaluation”.

Participatory evaluation is more appropriate for formative vs. summative evaluation. Emphasis is program improvement and learning, not definitive statements about impact. Rarely are findings generalizable.

Participatory evaluation stems from various roots including Freirian theories of education to promote social justice; multiple traditions of action research that focus on empowerment and transformation; evaluation approaches that address either evaluation utilization and/or capacity building. Two principal strands of participatory evaluation have been defined: (1) practical participatory evaluation that seeks to foster the use of evaluation for decision making; and (2) transformative participatory evaluation that seeks to empower participants and mobilize social change (Cousins and Whitmore, 1998).

Why conduct participatory evaluation?

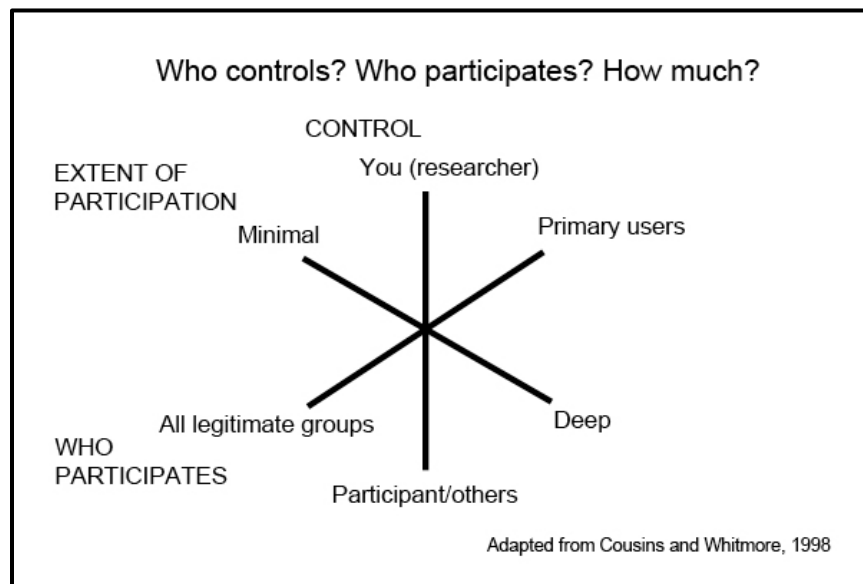
- Yields more realistic, relevant evaluation and useful data; grounded in reality
- Increases likelihood that evaluation data will be used
- Builds individual and organizational capacity
- Democratizes evaluation
- Provides an empowering, transformational opportunity for all involved
- Enhances understanding of program; organizational learning
- Builds skills, critical thinking, capacities

- Increases personal satisfaction and professional growth
- Builds trust and relationships

Disadvantages?

- Time consuming; resource intensive
- May be viewed as less viable by some
- May not address highly technical aspects
- Competes for time that could be spent in other ways
- May be misused
- Demands program and organizational commitment

NOTE: Participatory evaluation is not always appropriate. Choice of evaluation approach depends upon evaluation purpose, context and resources.



Reflective activity:

- 1) Using the “Planning a Program Evaluation Worksheet”, review each step from a participatory evaluation design perspective. Who will be involved? How? What role will you play?
- 2) Take a program evaluation you have been involved in recently and design it as a participatory evaluation. What would you do differently? What steps would you take? What do you think will be the strengths and weaknesses of using a participatory evaluation approach?

Further reading:

- Cousins, J.B. and Earl, L. M., 1992. The case for participatory evaluation. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*. 14, 397-418.
- Cousins, J.B. and Earl, L. M., 1995. Participatory Evaluation in Education: Studies in *Evaluation Use and Organizational Learning*. Washington, D.C.: Falmer Press.
- Cousins, J.B. and Whitmore, E., 1998. Framing Participatory Evaluation. In E. Whitmore, Ed. Understanding and Practicing Participatory Evaluation. *New Directions for Evaluation*, No. 80, Winter 1998.
- Harvard Family Research Project. *The Evaluation Exchange*. Volume 1, No 3/4., Fall 1995. Issue Topic: Participatory Evaluation.
- USAID. 1996. Conducting a Participatory Evaluation. Performance Monitoring and Evaluation TIPS. Number 1. Online at: http://www.usaid.gov/pubs/usaid_eval/pdf_docs/pnabs539.pdf