Empowerment evaluation in Brazil: building capacity and facilitating self-determination

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Resumo

mpowerment evaluation is a global phenomenon. It is being practiced in the United States, Finland, United Kingdom, South Africa, Japan, and Brazil, among many other countries.[1] Dr. Thereza Penna Firme recently invited Dr. Fetterman to discuss the most recent developments in empowerment evaluation and provide an empowerment evaluation in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, December 2004.

Empowerment Evaluation Workshop in Rio de Janeiro Poster

The effort was sponsored by Cesgranrio Foundation. Ana Carolina Letichevsky and Angela Dannemann helped organized the conference. This brief discussion highlights the three steps of empowerment evaluation and the 10 principles guiding the approach.

Dr. Thereza Penna Firme and Dr. Fetterman at the Cesgranrio Foundation
Overview

Empowerment evaluation is the use of evaluation concepts, techniques, and findings to foster improvement and self-determination (FETTERMAN, 2000; FETTERMAN; KAFTARIAN; WANDERSMAN, 1996). It is guided by a commitment to truth and honesty (FETTERMAN, 1998). It is designed to help people help themselves and improve their programs using a form of self-evaluation and reflection. Program participants – including

1 See empowerment evaluation web pages including http://homepage.mac.com/profdavidf and http://www.stanford.edu/~davidf/empowermentevaluation.html.

clients, consumers, and staff members – conduct their own evaluations; an outside evaluator often serves as a coach or additional facilitator depending on internal program capabilities. By internalizing and institutionalizing self-evaluation processes and practices, a dynamic and responsive approach to evaluation can be developed.

There are three steps involved in helping others learn to evaluate their own programs: 1) developing a mission, vision, or unifying purpose; 2) taking stock or determining where the program stands, including strengths and weaknesses; and 3) planning for the future by establishing goals and helping participants determine their own strategies to accomplish program goals and objectives. In addition, empowerment evaluators help program staff members and participants determine the type of evidence required to document and monitor progress credibly toward their goals. These steps combined help to create a "communicative space" (VANDERPLAAT, 1995) to facilitate emancipatory and "communicative action" (HABERMAS,1984).

Empowerment Evaluation 3 Steps

1. Mission
2. Taking Stock
3. Planning for the Future

Mission

The first step in an empowerment evaluation is to ask program staff members and participants to define their mission. This step can be accomplished in a few hours. An empowerment evaluator facilitates an open session with as many staff members and participants as possible.

Participants are asked to generate key phrases that capture the mission of the program or project. This is done even when an existing mission statement exists, because there are typically many new participants and the initial document may or may not have been generated in a democratic open forum. Proceeding in this fashion allows fresh new ideas to become a part of the mission and it also allows participants an opportunity to voice their vision of the program. It is common for groups to learn how divergent their participants' views are about the program, even when they have been working together for years. The evaluator records these phrases, typically on a poster sheet.

Then a workshop participant is asked to volunteer to write these telescopic phrases into a paragraph or two. This document is shared with the group, revisions and corrections are made in the process, and then the group is asked to accept the document on a consensus basis: that is, they do not have to be in favor of 100% of the document; they just have to be willing to live with it. The mission statement represents the values of the group, and as such, represents the foundation for the next step, taking stock.

Mission

- **Facilitate development of statement**
- **Group**
- **Democratic**
- **Making meaning & giving voice**

Taking Stock

The second step in an empowerment evaluation is taking stock. This step can also be conducted in a few hours, and has two sections. The first involves generating a list of key activities that are crucial to the functioning of the program. Once again, the empowerment evaluator serves as a facilitator, asking program staff members and participants to list the most significant features and/or activities associated with the program. A list of 10 to 20 activities is sufficient. After generating this list, it is time to prioritize and determine which are the most important activities meriting evaluation at this time.

One tool used to minimize the time associated with prioritizing activities involves voting with dots. The empowerment evaluator gives each participant five dot stickers, and asks the participants to place them by the activity on which the participant wants to focus. The participant can distribute them across five different activities or place all five on one activity. Counting the dots easily identifies the top 10 activities. The 10 activities with the most dots become the prioritized list of activities meriting evaluation at that time. (This process avoids long arguments about why one activity is valued more than another is, when both activities are included in the list of the top 10 program activities anyway.)

**Taking Stock
Part I**

- List
- Prioritize (dots)

Activities	Priorization with Dots
Communication	●●●●
Product	●●●●●●●●
Fundraising	●●●●●●

Empowerment Evaluation Brazilian Workshop Participant "Taking Stock Part I"

The second phase of taking stock involves rating the activities. Program staff members and participants are asked to rate how well they are doing concerning each activity on a 1 to 10 scale, with 10 as the highest level and 1 as the lowest. The staff members and participants only have minimal definitions about the components or activities at this point. Addition clarification can be pursued as needed; however, detailed definition and clarification become a significant part of the later dialogue process. (The group will never reach the rating stage if each activity is perfectly defined at this point. The rating process then sets the stage for dialogue, clarification, and communication.)

Typically, participants rate each of the activities while in their seats on their own piece of paper. Then they are asked to come up to the front of the room and record their ratings on a poster sheet of paper. This allows for some degree of independence in rating. In addition, it minimizes a long stream of second-guessing and checking to see what others are rating the same activities.

At the same time, there is nothing confidential about the process. Program staff members and participants place their initials at the top of the matrix and then record their ratings for each activity. Contrary to most research designs, this system is designed to ensure that everyone knows and is influenced by each other's ratings (after recording them on the poster sheet). This is part of the socialization process that takes place in an empowerment evaluation, opening up the discussion and stepping toward more open disclosure – speaking one's truth.

The taking stock phase of an empowerment evaluation is conducted in an open setting for three reasons: 1) it creates a democratic flow of information and exchange of information;

2) it makes it more difficult for managers to retaliate because it is in an open forum; and 3) it increases the probability that the disclosures will be diplomatic, because program staff members and participants must remain in that environment. Open discussions in a vacuum, without regard for workplace norms, are not productive. They are often unrealistic and can be counter-productive.

Staff members and participants are more likely to give their program a higher rating if they are only asked to give an overall or gestalt rating about the program. Consequently, it is important that program staff members and participants be asked to begin by assessing individual program activities. They are more likely to give some activities low ratings if they are given an equal opportunity to speak positively about, or rate, other activities highly. The ratings can be totaled and averaged by person and by activity. This provides some insight into routinely optimistic and pessimistic participants. It allows participants to see where they stand in relation to their peers, which helps them calibrate their own assessments in the future. The more important rating, of course, is across the matrix or spreadsheet by activity. Each activity receives a total and average. Combining the individual activity averages generates a total program rating, often lower than an external assessment rating. This represents the first baseline data concerning that specific program activity. This can be used to compare change over time.

All of this work sets the tone for one of the most important parts of the empowerment evaluation process: dialogue. The empowerment evaluator facilitates a discussion about the ratings. A survey would have accomplished the same task up to this point. However, the facilitator probes and asks why one person rated communication a 6, whereas two others rated it a 3 on the matrix.[2] Participants are asked to explain their rating and provide evidence or documentation to support the rating. This plants the seeds for the next stage of empowerment evaluation, planning for the future, where they will need to specify the evidence they plan to use to document that their activities are helping them accomplish their goals. The empowerment evaluator serves as a critical friend during this stage, facilitating discussion and making sure everyone is heard, and at the same time being critical and asking, "What do you mean by that?" or asking for additional clarification and substantiation about a particular rating or viewpoint.

Participants are asked for both the positive and negative basis for their ratings. For example, if they give communication a 3, they are asked why a 3. The typical response is because there is poor communication and they proceed to list reasons for this problem. The empowerment evaluator listens and helps record the information and then asks the question again, focusing on why it was a 3 instead of a 1. In other words, there must be something positive to report as well. An important part of empowerment evaluation involves building on strengths; even in weak areas, there is typically something positive that can be used to strengthen that activity or other activities. If the effort becomes exclusively

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2 See Fetterman (1998) for additional information about this example. Briefly, we learned that the participants were talking past each other or at least they were speaking on different levels of analysis. The individuals who rated communication a three stated that communication was poor in the school. However, the Dean rated communication a six because he was assessing communication in the school from a larger perspective. He thought we communicated much better than other departments in the Institute.

problem focused, all participants see are difficulties instead of strengths and opportunities to build and improve on practice.

Some participants give their programs or specific activities unrealistically high ratings. The absence of appropriate documentation, peer ratings, and a reminder about the realities of their environment—such as a high drop-out rate, students bringing guns to school, and racial violence in a high school--help participants recalibrate their ratings. Participants are reminded that they can change their ratings throughout the dialogue and exchange stage of the workshop, based on what they hear and learn from their peers. The ratings are not carved in stone. However, in some cases, ratings stay higher than peers consider appropriate. The significance of this process, however, is not the actual rating so much as it is the creation of a baseline, as noted earlier, from which future progress can be measured. In addition, it sensitizes program participants to the necessity of collecting data to support assessments or appraisals.

After examining 4 or 5 examples, beginning with divergent ones and ending with similar ratings (to determine if there are totally different reasons for the same or similar ratings), this phase of the workshop is generally complete. The group or a designated subcommittee continues to discuss the ratings, and the group is asked to return to the next workshop for planning for the future with the final ratings and a brief description or explanation of what the ratings meant. (This is normally shared with the group for review, at a time in which ratings can still be changed, and then a consensus is sought concerning the document.) This process is superior to surveys because it generally has a higher response rate – close to 100% depending on how many staff members and participants are present — and it allows participants to discuss what they meant by their ratings, to recalibrate and revise their ratings based on what they learn, thus minimizing "talking past each other" about certain issues or other miscommunications such as defining terms differently and using radically different rating systems. Participants learn what a 3 and an 8 mean to individuals in the group in the process of discussing and arguing about these ratings. This is a form of norming, helping create shared meanings and interpretations within a group.

Taking Stock Part II

- Rating 1 (low) – 10 (high)
- Dialogue

Activities	Initials of Participant	Initials of Participant	Initials of Participant	Average
Communication	3	6	3	**4.00**
Teaching	4	5	9	**6.00**
Funding	5	2	1	**2.67**
Product Development	1	8	4	**4.33**
Average	**3.25**	**5.25**	**4.25**	**4.25**

Planning for the Future

After rating their program's performance and providing documentation to support that rating, program participants are asked "Where they want to go from here?" They are asked how they would like to improve on what they do well and not so well. The empowerment evaluator asks the group to use the taking stock list of activities as the basis for their plans for the future – so that their mission guides their taking stock phase, and the results of their taking stock shapes their planning for the future. This creates a thread of coherence and an audit trail for each step of their evaluation and action plans.

Goals. Program staff members and participants are asked to list their goals based on the results of their taking stock exercise. They set specific goals associated with each activity. Then the empowerment evaluator asks members of the group for strategies to accomplish each goal. They are also asked to generate forms of evidence to monitor progress toward specified goals. Program staff members and participants supply all of this information.

The empowerment evaluator is not superior or inferior in the process. They are equals. They add ideas as deemed appropriate without dominating discussion. Their primary role is to serve as a coach, facilitator, and critical evaluative friend. The empowerment evaluator must be able to serve as a facilitator, helping program members and participants process and be heard. The evaluator must also be analytical and critical, asking or prompting participants to clarify, document, and evaluate what they are doing, to ensure that specific goals are achieved. If the evaluator is only critical and analytical, the group will walk away from the endeavor. The empowerment evaluator must maintain a balance of these talents or team up with other coaches from within the group or outside the group who can help them maintain this balance.

The selected goals should be established in conjunction with supervisors and clients to ensure relevance from both perspectives. In addition, goals should be realistic, taking into consideration such factors as initial conditions, motivation, resources, and program dynamics. They should also take into consideration external standards, such as accreditation agency standards, superintendent's 5-year plan, board of trustee dictates, board standards, and so on.

In addition, it is important that goals be related to the program's activities, talents, resources, and scope of capability. One problem with traditional external evaluation is that programs have been given grandiose goals or long-term goals that participants could only contribute to in some indirect manner. There is no link between an individual's daily activities and ultimate long-term program outcomes in terms of these goals. In empowerment evaluation, program participants are encouraged to select intermediate goals that are directly linked to their daily activities. These activities can then be linked to larger, more diffuse goals, creating a clear chain of reasoning and outcomes.

Program participants are encouraged to be creative in establishing their goals. A brainstorming approach is often used to generate a new set of goals. In such a process, individuals are asked to state what they think the program should be doing. The list generated from this activity is refined, reduced, and made realistic after the brainstorming phase, through a critical review and consensual agreement process.

There are also a bewildering number of goals to strive for at any given time. As a group begins to establish goals based on this initial review of their program, they realize quickly that a consensus is required to determine the most significant issues to focus on. These are chosen according to (a) significance to the operation of the program, such as teaching in an educational setting; (b) timing or urgency, such as recruitment or budget issues; and (c) vision, including community building and learning processes.

Goal setting can be a slow process when program participants have a heavy work schedule. Sensitivity to the pacing of this effort is essential. Additional tasks of any kind and for any purpose may be perceived as simply another burden when everyone is fighting to keep their heads above water. However, individuals interested in specific goals should be asked to volunteer to be responsible for them as a team leader to ensure follow-through and internal accountability.

Developing Strategies. Program participants are also responsible for selecting and developing strategies to accomplish program objectives. The same process of brainstorming, critical review, and consensual agreement is used to establish a set of strategies, which are routinely reviewed to determine their effectiveness and appropriateness. Determining appropriate strategies, in consultation with sponsors and clients, is an essential part of the empowering process. Program participants are typically the most knowledgeable about their own jobs, and this approach acknowledges and uses that expertise—and in the process, puts them back in the driver's seat.

Planning for the Future

- Goals
- Strategies
- Evidence

Documenting Progress. Program staff members and participants are asked what type of documentation or evidence is required to monitor progress toward their goals.[3] This is a critical step. Each form of documentation is scrutinized for relevance to avoid devoting time to collecting information that will not be useful or pertinent. Program participants are asked to explain how a given form of documentation is related to specific program goals. This review process is difficult and time-consuming, but prevents wasted time and disillusionment at the end of the process. In addition, documentation must be credible and rigorous if it is to withstand the criticism that this evaluation is self-serving.[4]

The entire process of establishing a mission, taking stock, and planning for the future creates an implicit logic model[5] or program theory, demonstrating how there is nothing as practical as a good theory of action, especially one grounded in participant's own experiences.[6]

Mid-Course Corrections and 2nd Data Point

This process is cyclical in that traditional evaluation methods are used to test whether their strategies are working, such as interviews and surveys, to allow the community to make mid-course corrections as needed based on this evaluative feedback. The community conducts another formal assessment of their activities and compares their assessment with their previous ratings of key activities. In other words, the initial taking stock exercise represents the community's baseline for future comparison.

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3 See Linney and Wanderman (1991, 1996) for self-help documents to facilitate the process of documenting processes, outcomes, and impacts.

4 For additional discussion on this topic, see Fetterman (1994).

5 See Dugan (1996) for an illustration of how logic models are used in empowerment evaluations.

6For additional discussion about program theory, see Bickman (1987); Chen (1990); Connell   and others (1995); Cook and Shadish (1994); McClintock (1990); Patton (1989); Weiss (1998, p. 55-71); Wholey (1987).

The plans for the future represent the intervention and the second taking stock exercise is a second data point enabling the community to measure growth or change over time by comparing the baseline ratings with the 2nd data point ratings.[7]

10 Principles

Empowerment evaluation principles in practice (FETTERMAN; WANDERSMAN, 2005) is the latest book about empowerment evaluation. It builds on the three steps by providing empowerment evaluation coaches and facilitators (as well as funders and community members) with guiding principles to assist them in the practice of empowerment evaluation. These principles are particularly useful when making decisions in the field, such as whether to include or not include a specific group. For example, although it might be easier to exclude a specific group because of time constraints or logistic considerations, the principle of inclusion reminds the coach and community members to error on the side of inclusion. It is more efficient to include than to exclude since exclusion typically results in retro-fitting or conducting the process over again with the new group at one point or another.

The principles can be visualized as a container in which the community, donor, and evaluator represent the structural integrity of the container. The structure or environment for empowerment is stronger if each group is represented. Applying each of the 10 principles in an empowerment evaluation increases the level of empowerment and self-determination, like water rising in a glass.

Collaboration

Empowerment evaluation is a collaborative group activity, not an individual pursuit. An evaluator does not and can not empower anyone; people empower themselves, often with assistance and coaching. Empowerment evaluation can create an environment that is conducive to empowerment and self-determination. This process is fundamentally democratic in the sense that it invites (if not demands) participation, examining issues of concern to the entire community in an open forum. As a result, the context changes: the assessment of a program's value and worth is not the endpoint of the evaluation – as it often is in traditional evaluation – but is part of an ongoing process of program improvement. This new context acknowledges a simple but often overlooked truth: merit and worth are not static values. Populations shift, goals shift, knowledge about program practices and their value change, and external forces are highly unstable. By internalizing and institutionalizing self-evaluation processes and practices, a dynamic and responsive approach to evaluation can be developed to accommodate these shifts. As Usher (1995, p. 62-63) explains,

By developing the capacity to monitor and assess their own performance, program managers and staff can risk the mistakes that often occur with innovation. This is because they can detect problems and make midcourse corrections before the results of errors due to planning or execution become widely apparent and costly. Having the capacity and responsibility to obtain

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such information about program operations and impact thus empowers managers and staff to explore new ways to enhance their performance.

Both value assessments and corresponding plans for program improvement-developed by the group with the assistance of a trained evaluator – are subject to a cyclical process of reflection and self-evaluation. Program participants learn continually to assess their progress toward self-determined goals and to reshape their plans and strategies according to this assessment. In the process, self-determination is fostered, illumination generated, and liberation actualized. Value assessments are also highly sensitive to the life cycle of the program or organization. Goals and outcomes are geared toward the appropriate developmental level of implementation. Extraordinary improvements are not expected of a project that will not be fully implemented until the following year. Similarly, seemingly small gains or improvements in programs at an embryonic stage are recognized and appreciated in relation to their stage of development. In a fully operational and mature program, moderate improvements or declining outcomes are viewed more critically.

Process Use

Empowerment evaluation ensures that each voice is heard in the chorus, but when the performance begins it is the chorus that is heard. Empowerment evaluation is about building capacity, building community, and building a future. Teaching evaluation logic and skills is a way of building capacity for ongoing self-assessment – enhancing the capacity for self-determination. According to Patton (1997, p. 156), "Participation and collaboration can lead to a long-term commitment to use evaluation logic and techniques thereby building a culture of learning among those involved."

Moreover,

learning to see the world as an evaluator sees it, often has a lasting impact on those who participate in an evaluation – an impact that can be greater and last longer than the findings that result from that same evaluation, especially where those involved can apply that learning to future planning and evaluation situations. (PATTON, 1997).

This is process use. This is ownership.

Conclusion

In a time of great skepticism and cynicism about business, education, and the future, empowerment evaluation confirms that good faith and hope exists in both individuals and institutions. There is good work being done on both small and large scales. The community-based work is not perfect or seamless or without failures. However, it is a form of radical change and transformation for many engaged as a community of learners and doers. An empowerment model, in which self-determination is fundamental, creates a synergistic force in our communities to do good – pursuing a social justice agenda. Empowerment evaluations can be conducted on a shoe-string budget or as Hewlett-Packard demonstrated, it can be used on a $15 million dollar Digital Village project.

As Bess Stephens - Hewlett-Packard's Vice President and Worldwide Director for Corporate Philanthropy and Education - explains, empowerment evaluation is "trying to make a difference in the lives of people long after this particular HP initiative has ended." This is what sustainability, empowerment, and capacity building are all about.

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