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## Building a community-based culture of evaluation



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### ABSTRACT

In this article we argue for a community-based approach as a means of promoting a culture of evaluation. We do this by linking two bodies of knowledge – the 70-year theoretical tradition of community-based research and the trans-discipline of program evaluation – that are seldom intersected within the evaluation capacity building literature. We use the three hallmarks of a community-based research approach (community-determined; equitable participation; action and change) as a conceptual lens to reflect on a case example of an evaluation capacity building program led by the Ontario Brian Institute. This program involved two community-based groups (Epilepsy Southwestern Ontario and the South West Alzheimer Society Alliance) who were supported by evaluators from the Centre for Community Based Research to conduct their own internal evaluation. The article provides an overview of a community-based research approach and its link to evaluation. It then describes the featured evaluation capacity building initiative, including reflections by the participating organizations themselves. We end by discussing lessons learned and their implications for future evaluation capacity building. Our main argument is that organizations that strive towards a community-based approach to evaluation are well placed to build and sustain a culture of evaluation.

### 1. Introduction

The topic of evaluation capacity building has been of growing interest within the evaluation field (Bourgeois & Cousins, 2013; Labin, Duffy, Meyers, Wandersman, & Lesesne, 2012; Preskill, 2014). Evaluation capacity building is typically understood to involve the building of knowledge, skills and attitudes of organization members to engage in ongoing evaluation work (Preskill & Boyle, 2008a). While the discussion has extended to governmental and institutional settings, evaluation capacity building is increasingly being applied to community-based organizations in recognition of the fact that many struggle to routinely conduct evaluation (Garcia-Iriarte, Suarez-Balcazar, Taylor-Ritzler, & Luna, 2011). Identified capacity challenges of community-based organizations include limited staff expertise in the technical research aspects of evaluation, ill-defined program theory, uncertainty as how to measure divergent outcomes among diverse clients, the excessive burden of evaluation on existing staff workloads, insufficient financial resources, and insufficient support from organizational leadership (Carman, 2007a,b; Reed & Morariu, 2010; Sehl, 2004).

In response, a growing number of initiatives have emerged in recent years designed to build a culture of evaluation within community-based organizations. Initiatives have been led by government, non-governmental funders, campuses, and by sector-specific associations and umbrella networks. Regardless of how these capacity building initiatives are instigated and led, they have a common desire to better equip community-based organizations to both conduct evaluation and to use evaluation results (Cousins et al., 2008).

In a survey of 899 nationally sampled not-for-profit organizations across the United States, Reed and Morariu (2010) found that professional evaluators (whether internal evaluation staff or external evaluators) are responsible for evaluations in only 21% of organizations. Non-evaluation staff are much more likely to lead evaluations within community-based organizations (see also Bakken, Núñez, & Couture, 2014). Therefore in order to be effective, evaluation capacity building efforts need to engage staff with potentially little experience, little expertise or even little interest in conducting formal evaluation. Staff may in fact adopt a reactive stance to evaluation, fulfilling evaluation duties in response to delegation from organizational leaders who themselves

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may be responding to accountability demands of funders (Lennie, Tacchi, Wilmore, & Koirala, 2015; O’Conner & Netting, 2008). In contrast, evaluation capacity building stresses ongoing organizational learning, viewing evaluation proactively as necessary for healthy organizational development (Hoole & Patterson, 2008; Preskill & Boyle, 2008b) and for broader social innovation (Janzen, Seskar-Hencic et al., 2012). In short, effective evaluation capacity building needs to create vision that inspires and motivates (why evaluate), as much as to build knowledge and skills that are needed to design, implement, and sustain evaluation practice in an ongoing way (how to evaluate) (Preskill & Boyle, 2008b).

But how best to do this? Many existing evaluation capacity building strategies tend to rely on an “expert-based” pedagogical approach (Bakken et al., 2014). That is to say, these strategies impart externally-sourced theoretical knowledge about how best to do and use evaluation. They emphasize mastery of the generic technical aspects of evaluation at the expense of engaging the unique motivational, communicative and relational aspects of a particular program (Lennie et al. 2015). We suggest that an expert-based approach limits evaluation capacity building in three main ways; namely it is less likely to: 1) enable those closest to and most effected by the program to drive the evaluation agenda, 2) engage stakeholders to contribute their experiential and practical knowledge when guiding and implementing evaluation activities, and 3) lead to evaluation utilization and organizational change.

In this article we argue for an alternative “community-based” approach that we believe addresses the limitations above, and therefore is better suited in building a proactive culture of evaluation within community-based organizations. Such an approach draws on rich global research traditions more expansive than typically found in evaluation capacity building literature favouring Western thought (see Labin et al., 2012 for a detailed review of this literature). We begin by providing an overview of a community-based research approach and its link to evaluation. We then relate how this approach was applied within community-based organizations involved in an evaluation capacity building initiative led by the Ontario Brain Institute (OBI). We end by discussing lessons learned and their implications for future evaluation capacity building.

## 2. Overview of community-based research and its link to evaluation

As one type in the broader typology of research, the field of evaluation can draw on the growing literature about how research can be most impactful within community settings. Such approaches to research operate under a variety of names including (but not limited to): community-based participatory research (e.g., Israel et al., 2003; Minkler & Wallertsein, 2008), action research (e.g., Stringer, 2007), community-engaged scholarship (e.g., Kajner, 2015), and participatory action research (e.g., Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). It is “community-based research” that seems to be gaining global traction as a synthesis term, as evidenced by the establishment of the UNESCO chair of Community-based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education (Etmanski, Hall, & Dawson, 2014; GUNi, 2015). Regardless of terminology, and after decades of practice, a community-based approach to research is becoming mainstream in many institutions of higher education and community organizations around the world (Hall, Tandon, & Tremblay, 2015).

There are compelling reasons for this shift. Increasingly, community-based research is being seen as a catalyst in addressing complex community issues. A community-based approach provides practical advantage in recognizing community members as knowledge-rich partners, offering their experiential and practical knowledge in complement to theoretical knowledge held by outside experts (Heron & Reason, 1997; Ochocka, Janzen, & Nelson, 2002;). Knowledge is therefore co-created through community engagement, which also

serves to maximise research utilization (Small & Uttal, 2005; Wallerstein & Duran, 2003). From a theoretical perspective, community members are seen to provide insider knowledge useful in shaping the inquiry’s purpose and research questions, and helpful in collaboratively refining theories (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Fitzgerald, Burack, & Seifer, 2010). Finally, a community-based approach responds to fundamental issues of fairness and equity. “Knowledge democracy” is advanced by recognizing knowledge creation as a matter of cognitive justice, in which the right of different forms of knowledge co-exist and in which community members are seen as full partners in research that impacts their lives (de Sousa Santos, 2006; Gaventa, 1993; Hall, 2011; Visvanathan, 2009).

Consistent with these stated benefits, community-based research can be defined as “a research approach that involves active participation of stakeholders, those whose lives are affected by the issue being studied, in all phases of research for the purpose of producing useful results to make positive changes” (Nelson, Ochocka, Griffin, & Lord, 1998:12). Those adopting this approach typically have as a general goal the creation of more supportive and responsive communities that are better able to innovatively address pressing societal issues to the benefit of all citizens, especially those with limited access to power and opportunity (Janzen, Ochocka, & Stobbe, 2016). Certainly many community-based organizations would be receptive to such an end goal if research (including evaluative research) could but deliver.

Below we list three hallmarks of a community-based approach to research. We also link each of these hallmarks to existing evaluation literature, albeit in a very cursory way. The hallmarks draw inspiration from Israel, Schulz, Parker, and Becker (1998), as well as through our own research collaborations over 35 years (for fuller elaboration of these hallmarks see Author and Author under review; Ochocka & Janzen, 2014; Ochocka, Moorlag, & Janzen, 2010; Wiebe & Taylor, 2014). The hallmarks each address one of the three limitations to expert-based approaches that we listed above. Each hallmark also corresponds to a deep research tradition that, when taken together, blend diverse global perspectives.

**Community-driven** is a hallmark of community-based research that emphasizes the practical relevance of the research to community members. Community members, especially those most affected by the issue under study, gain voice and choice through the research process (Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008), with the research drawing on the ways of knowing that resonate with them (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). This hallmark honours *Indigenous research traditions* in which research processes promote self-determination among community members (Kovach, 2015). Within the evaluation literature this hallmark is most clearly articulated by *empowerment evaluation* and its principles of community ownership and community knowledge (Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005) as well as other *democratic* forms of evaluation (Greene, 2006). It is also evident within evaluations of Indigenous (e.g., LaFrance & Nichols, 2010) and other faith-based (e.g., Janzen & Wiebe, 2010) interventions whose theories of change are rooted in epistemological perspectives that differ from the liberal materialism ideology that is dominant in the secularized West (Ager & Ager, 2011).

**Equitable participation** emphasizes that community members and researchers share control of the research agenda through active and reciprocal involvement in the research design, implementation, and dissemination (Hall, 1975; Nelson et al., 1998; Ochocka et al., 2010). Drawing on the participatory research tradition of the *global south*, this hallmark acknowledges that when people are conscious of their situation and the power that oppresses them, they can collectively work towards emancipation and a better future (Fals Borda, 1987; Freire, 1970; Ochocka & Janzen, 2014). Practically, an emphasis on equitable participation has meant the engagement of committed activists and other “decisive stakeholders” who are central to the research issue, and who may or may not have had previous experience in research activities (Chaudhary, Dhar, & Tandon, 1989). An emphasis on

participation emerged within the evaluation field in the 1980's in international development (Birsolara, 1998) and from those calling for greater *stakeholder involvement* in North America (e.g., Weiss, 1983). It was further refined by those articulating *participatory evaluation* (e.g., Jackson & Kassam, 1998; King, 2007) and *collaborative inquiry* within evaluation (e.g., Cousins & Chouinard, 2012; Labin et al., 2012). *Transformative evaluation*, with its anti-oppressive lens and promotion of social justice, privileges participation for those historically excluded from evaluation inquiry (Mertens, 2008).

**Action and change** honours the so-called “northern” action research tradition that is frequently associated with Kurt Lewin. This hallmark has an emphasis on progressive change through successive reflective action cycles (Lewin, 1948, 1951). It stresses that both the process and results of research should be useful to community members in making positive social innovation and change (Nelson et al., 1998; Ochocka & Janzen, 2014). Recently there has been a great deal written about evaluation as promoting *learning organizations* (e.g., Bakken et al., 2014; Fleischer, Christie, & LaVelle, 2008; Preskill & Boyle, 2008b) and *reflective practice* (e.g., Janzen, Seskar-Hencic et al., 2012; Jayatilleke & Mackie, 2012). These writings have been spurred on by a pragmatic *utilization-focused* understanding of evaluation with its emphasis on instrumental, conceptual, persuasive and process use (Patton, 2008), and on evaluation capacity building that foregrounds experiential learning (Labin et al., 2012). More recently, *developmental evaluation* (Patton, 2010) and *systems change evaluation* (Foster-Fishman & Long, 2009) have extended the reflective action cycle model within contexts of complexity and ambiguity.

Taken together, these three hallmarks provide a broad conceptual lens with which to reflect on evaluation capacity building. Our premise is that a culture of evaluation is maximized when community-based organizations strive to implement each of these hallmarks as much as possible within their particular circumstance. In this sense a community-based approach is not an absolute standard, but rather research can be seen to be more or less “community-based” depending on the degree to which it is community-driven, participatory and action-oriented. What follows is a case example to illustrate this point.

### 3. The evaluation support program

The *Ontario Brain Institute (OBI)* is a provincially-funded, not-for-profit research centre seeking to maximize the impact of neuroscience and to establish Ontario, Canada as a world leader in brain research, commercialization and care. In January 2015 OBI launched the inaugural cohort of a new evaluation capacity-building program called “The Evaluation Support Program” ([www.braininstitute.ca/evaluation-support-program](http://www.braininstitute.ca/evaluation-support-program)). The program's aim was to build a culture of evaluative thinking within community-based organizations providing brain-related services, while striving to produce continued evidence-based improvements of community services.

Four community-based projects were selected to join the initial annual cohort during the 2015 calendar year through an application process. These projects were each linked with one of two designated Evaluation Specialist organizations: Centre for Community Based Research (CCBR) and the Evaluation Centre for Complex Health Interventions. Two projects – the South West Alzheimer Society Alliance (SWASA) and the Epilepsy Support Centre – are the focus of this article. A brief description of these organizations is found in the section that follows.

Both projects were paired with the *Centre for Community Based Research (CCBR)* as the Evaluation Specialist to support their internal evaluation over the course of one year. Each project independently negotiated the role of CCBR in supporting their internal evaluation.

CCBR is a not-for-profit organization affiliated with St. Paul's University College at the University of Waterloo. Established in 1982, CCBR's mission is to develop communities that are responsive and supportive, especially for those with limited access to power and

opportunity. The bulk of our 400 plus projects have been to conduct, support, and promote a community-based approach to evaluation. Evaluation activities have spanned wide ranging social and health topics both within public and not-for-profit sectors, primarily in Canada but also internationally. CCBR has played a national leadership role in Community Based Research Canada and the Community-University Exposition (CUExpo) movement. A team of four staff provided active support throughout the year.

The Evaluation Support Program used seven of the ten commonly-defined strategies for evaluation capacity-building (Preskill & Boyle, 2008b), namely:

1. *Workshop training*: Three day-long workshops held near the beginning, middle and end of the year with all participants of The Evaluation Support Program.
2. *Written materials*: Provision of selected articles and other resource materials related to evaluation.
3. *Direct participation*: Active involvement from each of the participating organization's staff, volunteers and clients in the design and implementation of their own internal evaluation.
4. *Mentoring/coaching*: Ongoing individualized support from Evaluation Specialists as needed
5. *Technical assistance*: Individualized training and technical support provided by the Evaluation Specialists as needed.
6. *Allocated meetings*: Regular stakeholder steering committee meetings to guide each step of the internal evaluation process (4–5 meetings for each internal evaluation)
7. *Community of practice*: Activities encouraging evaluation reflection and mutual support across programs involved in the Evaluation Support Program (e.g., discussions and participant presentations at workshop events; production of a video reflecting on the Evaluation Support Program experience; co-writing of this journal article)

A community-based approach was emphasized within all the strategies mentioned above. Combined, the strategies stressed the value of working closely with program stakeholders to collaboratively reflect on their contextual circumstances when designing and implementing the evaluation (Fitzpatrick, 2012). For example, while each organization was encouraged to collaboratively develop a preliminary program theory of change near the onset, they were also encouraged to remain open to the unexpected and attend to the emergent as is common in community-based work. Both ESWO and SWASA captured their theory of change within a program logic model, but in creative designs that resonated with and reinforced their own contextual assumptions about the nature of change (one logic model was based on a circular flower format while the other in a more linear column format).

Practically speaking, over the course of the year both the ESWO and SWASA were supported to conduct a complete evaluation cycle following the generic four phase process common within a community-based research approach (see Fig. 1). While we elaborate on the mechanics of this approach in more detail elsewhere (Janzen et al., 2016; Ochocka & Janzen, 2014), it is presented here to provide overarching orientation. Of particular note are the features that we see as being distinctively “community-based”:

- a) The “laying the foundation” and “acting on findings” phases which supplement the more traditional planning and data gathering/analysis phases by foregrounding stakeholder engagement and evaluation use in response to local context.
- b) The non-linear activities within each phase that include not only technical research elements (related to conducting the practical steps of research), but also relational research competencies (related to facilitating involvement of stakeholders in research decision-making).
- c) The openness to make mid-stream changes, illustrated by the arrow looping back from phase 3 to phase 2, emphasizing an evaluation

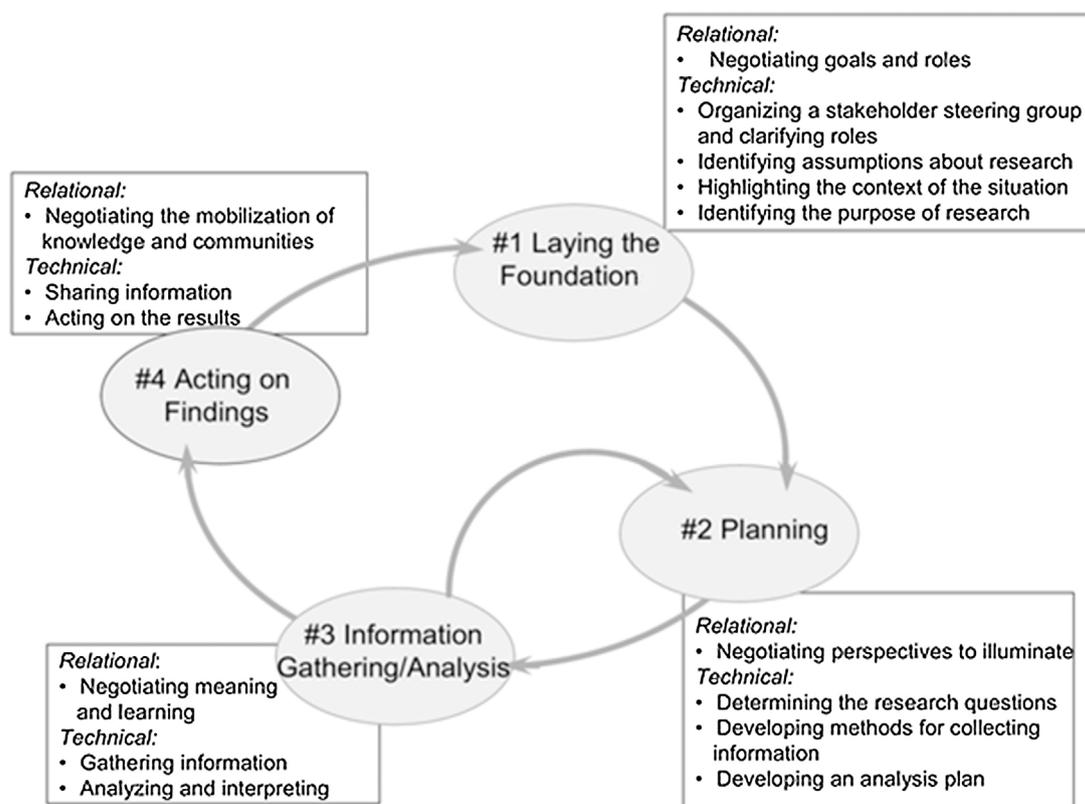


Fig. 1. The Four Phases of a Community-Based Research Approach.

approach that is systematic yet responsive to emerging local conditions, new learnings and ways of knowing.

- d) The potential for successive evaluation cycles that build over time; when one evaluation cycle is complete stakeholders lay the foundation for subsequent evaluations that build on the learnings of the previous.

As with the three hallmarks discussed above, these distinctive features suggest that a successful collaborative process of inquiry is as important as the findings of research (Reason, 2006). In other words, research and evaluation produces not only a vision for future collective action but also builds a sense of community and enables/inspires people to work toward that vision (Stringer, 2007).

#### 4. Stories of how a community-based approach was implemented

This section outlines how a community-based approach to evaluation was implemented with two groups who participated in OBI's Evaluation Support Program. Each group writes their own story of how a community-based approach was adopted over the course of the year in response to their unique programming context, and the extent to which these efforts helped to build a culture of evaluation.

##### 4.1. South West Alzheimer Society Alliance (SWASA)

SWASA is made up of the six Alzheimer Societies geographically located in the southwestern Ontario (Elgin, Grey-Bruce, London Middlesex, Oxford, Huron, and Perth). The alliance is a strategic partnership to facilitate the ability to undertake joint projects that improve capacity. The evaluation project has been a priority for SWASA with the main goal to improve quality and performance. The evaluation considered the implementation and outcomes of the three elements of core support services that were common amongst the six chapters. These services included: the First Link Learning Series, individual support,

and support groups. Together, the core support services strive towards increasing the use of coping strategies, developing caregiver skills, increasing the capability and confidence for people with the disease and their caregivers to live well with dementia, and increasing connections with the Alzheimer Society throughout the dementia journey. As such, SWASA could be viewed as a model of "collective impact" (Kania & Kramer, 2011) in that members identified a common agenda, and pursued mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and measurement of outcomes all in an attempt to better address the pressing societal issue of developing community-based dementia supports. The italic section below describes the SWASA experience of the Evaluation Support Program in their own words.

In 2015 SWASA embarked on an evaluation journey as part of The Evaluation Support Program supported by OBI. Now that our formal involvement in this program has come to end, we have taken the time to reflect on the process and the intended outcomes of this capacity-building project. Have we been successful in building a culture of evaluation?

We had the opportunity of being paired with the CCB. They were a crucial link in providing the training and coaching we needed to move our evaluation project forward. With the support of the CCB evaluation team, stakeholders were able to drive the direction of the evaluation based on our purpose and needs of our clients and our organization. Over the course of the year, SWASA completed focus groups, case studies, and surveys with persons with dementia and their caregivers, as well as key informant interviews with health care organizations.

We were consistently challenged in our thinking by the CCB team to focus and reflect on the purpose and goals of our evaluation resulting in us taking ownership of the project from the very first training session. It was our evaluation project and our results. The training that was provided was done in a unique way which assisted in translating the knowledge gained through the training into practice. It was extremely helpful to learn about the four evaluation phases. This practical, step-by-step approach was easy to understand and apply. By learning the

theory in a workshop format and then being able to put this knowledge into practice quickly solidified our knowledge and understanding. This training approach was repeated throughout the project covering all four phases of evaluation. We were able to immediately see our new knowledge in action which supported the value of the training and the value of the evaluation process. This approach helped build buy-in and excitement within the cross-agency evaluation steering committee which then translated into each of our respective individual organizations.

Through the evaluation project and the support of the CCBR team we gained a greater understanding of what quality evaluation is. For example, we learned that it is good practice to have stakeholders involved from the beginning of an evaluation especially to hear the voices of those with lived experience and have these individuals involved in co-designing the evaluation approach and methods. Another key learning for our group was around the development of a program logic model, and its ability to enhance the quality of the evaluation. Using a logic model was practical, directive, and flexible. As such, it can be used in a variety of situations within and between organizations.

Of course, with new learning came challenges with implementation. Even with all of the support provided, the organizational time needed to spend on evaluation is and continues to be a factor in supporting a culture of evaluation. The importance placed on dedicated staff resources and supportive organizational management cannot be underestimated. By providing the human resources required to fulfill this year long project we now have the evaluation applications and processes available to us to use in the future. Another challenge impacting our ability to carry out evaluation was the lack of staff confidence in data analysis (e.g., statistics, confidence-level determination, identifying key themes and trends). We did receive additional technical training in this area, however until we apply this learning on our own we are unable to build confidence for this phase of evaluation.

We have always been aware of the importance of evaluation but previously lacked the knowledge of how to do it. Over the past year, we gained an understanding of the practical application of evaluation processes that have been carried out after project completion. We have learned skills that we can apply to other evaluative opportunities within our organizations. The project has provided us with a means to have sound, statistical data to move us forward in meeting the needs of our clients. We have a final report that is professional – it is a source of information internally to our organization for strategic planning purposes and for allowing us to understand client support needs. The final report has also been used as an external knowledge mobilization tool with our funders and other external stakeholders.

The implementation of evaluation results has begun. For example, SWASA will be developing a South West Quality Improvement Plan using the recommendations in the report. We now have the data gathering tools to utilize and are able to critically examine where changes need to be made. Our evaluation experience gives us strength to go beyond our comfort zone and to delve further into the evaluation process. In the end, a community-based culture of evaluation has been created and we have an ongoing commitment to evaluation from senior leadership to front line staff. The opportunities to learn and discuss the importance of evaluation have changed our attitudes and will assist in sustaining this culture. We have reached the next level of building a culture of evaluation.

#### 4.2. Epilepsy Southwestern Ontario (ESWO)

ESWO enhances the lives of people who are affected by epilepsy and seizure disorders by providing a network of services that educate, support and build community awareness. The organization provides a variety of educational and support services throughout Southwestern Ontario to people living with epilepsy, their families and their communities. The evaluation assessed the implementation and outcomes of Game On, a physical literacy program for children (aged 4–12) with

epilepsy and other neurological disorders. The six-week program provides children with a variety of group and one-on-one activities and games, while engaging parents/caregivers and youth volunteers in aspects of programming. The italic section below describes the ESWO experience of the Evaluation Support Program in their own words.

In 2015, Epilepsy Southwestern Ontario (ESWO) had the opportunity through OBI to submit a proposal to be part of the Evaluation Support Program. In this process, ESWO was able to identify their needs for evaluation. Specifically, our Game On program needed to gauge the effectiveness of currently implemented evaluation tools, and determine if better standardized tools could be used or developed to suit the needs of the program, as well as its specific target population, children with neurological conditions. ESWO was grateful to be accepted into the program, and to partner with CCBR to explore and revisit program evaluation within our agency. It was evident after the first workshop that although we had been evaluating the Game On program, this would be a great opportunity to access support to enhance our evaluation methods, engage stakeholders in the process, and build a credible case for funding opportunities.

Our first step was to assemble a steering committee, which included stakeholders; parents, program volunteers, program staff, the Executive Director and CCBR researchers. The stakeholders were involved in every step of the research process, including dissemination of results to the other stakeholders and community partners. This fostered a culture of engagement and ownership of the process, and from our experience created depth and breadth of perspectives at the table. These perspectives included lived experience, first hand program knowledge, and administrative and research oriented perspectives. This variety provided a strong foundation for the evaluation of our program, strongly rooted in our community.

Steering Committee meetings took place regularly throughout the study to share progress and seek feedback. Constant communication occurred between researchers and program staff that were collecting and reporting data. CCBR staff were also accessible at any point in this process for support and mentorship. This cycle of open communication facilitated participation from all involved, therefore increasing engagement. Involving parents who had children in the program as steering committee members provided them with a deeper understanding of program goals, as well as why and how we evaluate the program. Volunteers that were part of the committee gained a big picture of program impact, and became more passionate about their impact as a volunteer. Through this process, ESWO staff learned that parents involved in the program actually had different needs and reasons for accessing the program than what staff had originally assumed. Therefore, it was determined in the early stages of design that the psychosocial impacts of the program needed to be evaluated, as this is the area that parents valued most and wanted to see measurable gain in their children.

CCBR researchers attended program sessions, and were able to see Game On in action to further their understanding of the dynamic group of children and how Game On impacts them. As a team, it was decided that parent focus groups during program sessions would be an efficient and convenient modality for data collection, as CCBR staff facilitated focus groups with the parents while their children were participating in Game On. This was very beneficial to staff, as it allowed them to oversee the program while providing a convenient way for parents to engage with each other and share their experiences with the program. It was intended to be a data collection method, but it turned out to be more beneficial to parents in that it allowed them to gain a sense of social support from their peers. This process also enabled an in-depth understanding (in accessible layman's terms) of the evaluation process and the purpose of Game On; as well as creating engagement and shared ownership within the program.

At the end of the evaluation process, it was important to reflect back on the challenges that occurred; because this is where our agency grew in terms of our ability to independently perform program evaluation.

One challenge was that the program was already running at the beginning of the Evaluation Support Program, meaning that we were working to add new evaluation into an existing program within a limited time frame. Additionally, we were bound to continue the use of pre-existing physical literacy assessment tools to satisfy granting expectations, while other stakeholders were more interested in learning about psychosocial outcomes. Our steering committee was able to work through these challenges as we developed a logic model together, and subsequently designed a dynamic evaluation plan in which existing evaluation tools were augmented with newly created ones.

In spite of our challenges, there were many positive outcomes. To begin, the comprehensive evaluation of the Game On program provided ESWO staff with valuable insight for program improvements. Looking back on the process, it is evident that although our non-profit organization knew the importance of program evaluation and was conducting evaluation to the best of our ability, it was beneficial to have a third party perspective on the tools that we were using. Throughout this process, we discovered that the time-intensive and resource-consuming tools and communication methods we were using were actually not providing helpful information to parents. Additionally, over the course of the year we saw stakeholders become invested in the program in ways beyond simply bringing their child to participate. Parents were developing peer support networks as a result of the focus groups, sharing about the evaluation process with other parents, and therefore increasing buy-in and engagement in the program. Everyone involved with the steering committee also learned first-hand the value of evaluation. More specifically, we learned that change can be good when rooted in their community and its stakeholders. This process allowed us to immediately implement valuable learnings as data came in, therefore improving the program for the remainder of the year.

Perhaps our most valuable take away from the Evaluation Support Program was that program evaluation at the community level is not difficult nor expensive if it is well planned and has all stakeholders on board. This opportunity allowed our agency to be guided through the entire evaluation process from start to finish, which provided a depth of experiential learning not gained by simply sitting through a workshop. The patience, expertise and mentoring support we received has given us confidence to extend this knowledge to tackle thorough evaluation of other agency programs

## 5. Reflecting on lessons learned

There are a number of overarching lessons about evaluation capacity building that we all learned from the experiences outlined above. We organize these lessons below according to the three hallmarks of community-based research, highlighting one key lesson for each before listing implications for evaluation capacity-building.

### 5.1. Be community-driven

One key lesson was to be intentional in ensuring that those central to the program have leadership in shaping the evaluation purpose and process in an ongoing way. For SWASA and ESWO this meant identifying and equipping a few program participants (and/or their caregivers), program staff and organizational managers to collectively provide leadership in evaluation planning, implementation, dissemination and utilization. Implications of this lesson for evaluation capacity-building include:

- Establish a cross-stakeholder steering committee who will act as joint leaders in guiding each phase of the evaluation process.
- Equip steering group to deal with power dynamics and with various ways of knowing by establishing principles of working together and by facilitating healthy relationships (finding commonalities and working across differences).
- Provide incremental training to designated evaluation leaders

through all four evaluation phases to ensure leaders have similar knowledge base and a common understanding of the program's theory of change. Be open to the emergent and unexpected, including unique motivational, communicative and relational aspects of a program.

- Seek out coaches as needed to assist in filling gaps in capacity on technical aspects of evaluation.
- Build on the natural interest, ways of thinking and existed expertise of in-house leaders by creating a range of leadership opportunities throughout the evaluation. Mistakes are fine!
- Create opportunities for evaluation leaders to link with others in a similar sector to exchange successes and challenges.

### 5.2. Ensure equitable participation

Another key lesson was to be intentional about grounding evaluation decision-making and engagement in the practical experiences of program stakeholders. For SWASA and ESWO this meant tailoring how they engaged the various program stakeholders when conducting the evaluation and when using evaluation results. Implications of this lesson for evaluation capacity-building include:

- Accommodate accessibility for all steering committee members to meaningfully participate in regular meetings.
- Avoid prescriptiveness by focusing on the uniqueness of the program context in determining the practical relevance of the evaluation; building consensus on *why* evaluation is important for the particular program and *how* best to do and use it.
- Draw on the insights and experiences of program staff and participants when developing the evaluation design, tools, and sampling/recruitment strategies.
- Facilitate direct participation of all staff and program participants in at least one concrete evaluation activity (e.g., logic model development, survey, focus group discussion, feedback session etc.) to ensure experiential learning opportunity.
- Seek out coaches as needed to assist in democratic facilitation that stresses personal interest, practicality, and fun.
- Involve diverse stakeholder perspectives when collaboratively drafting evaluation recommendations.

### 5.3. Promote action and change

A third key lesson was to be intentional about using the opportunity of evaluation to facilitate reflective practice that leads to progressive program change. For SWASA and ESWO this meant ensuring that their evaluation would function not only to produce new knowledge, but also function to mobilize both knowledge and people to make continual program improvements. Implications of this lesson for evaluation capacity-building include:

- Communicate evaluation results with all evaluation participants in formats that are tailored to engage specific stakeholder audiences.
- Develop regular communications about evaluation progress in such a way that senior administrators are informed and equipped to link evaluation evidence to program improvements.
- Co-chair staff/board meetings and other program gatherings to share the co-produced evaluation results and to facilitate discussions how to use evaluation for program improvements.
- Ensure that evaluation results are co-presented and co-authored by a cross-section of stakeholders to increase data trustworthiness and ownership of evaluation use.
- Celebrate accomplishments, including program improvements based on evaluation evidence that demonstrate the collective success of the evaluation experience.
- Nurture ongoing learning and critical thinking with others in a similar sector through regular knowledge exchange events.

## 6. Conclusion

In this article we argued for a community-based approach as a means of promoting a culture of evaluation. We did this by linking two bodies of knowledge – the 70-year theoretical research tradition of community-based research and the trans-discipline of program evaluation – that are seldom intersected within the evaluation capacity building literature (see Birsolara, 1998 and Cousins & Chouinard, 2012 as two notable exceptions in the broader evaluation literature). We used the three hallmarks of a community-based research approach (community-driven; equitable participation; action and change) as a conceptual lens to reflect on evaluation capacity building within a case example that involved two community-based groups within Ontario, Canada.

Our main argument has been that organizations that strive towards a community-based approach to evaluation are well placed to build and sustain a culture of evaluation. We believe that the core benefit of such a community-based approach lies in its potential to meaningfully engage. It is an approach that can engage people to articulate *why* evaluation is important through the shaping of shared attitudes, values and supporting policies (vision). It is an approach that can engage people to determine *what* the appropriate activities, settings and events should be to facilitate ongoing evaluation practice (structure). And it is an approach that can engage people to identify *how* best to equip themselves to do and use evaluation (process). Such systemic engagement that addresses vision, structures and processes in a multi-faceted way is critical when developing culture change (Foster-Fishman, Nowell, & Yang, 2007; Janzen, Chapman, & Watson, 2012; Kelly, Ryan, Altman, & Stelzner, 2000).

In closing, we see our article, at least in part, as a response to the call from Cousins, Whitmore, and Shulha's (2013) and Cousins, Whitmore, and Shulha's (2014) for "a common set of principles to guide collaborative practice in evaluation." Such a call maps well with our own interests in promoting excellence in community-engaged scholarship more generally – excellence that is rooted in the three hallmarks of community-based research and the global research traditions that they represent (see CCBR, 2017; Janzen et al., 2016). While our focus in this article has been on building the evaluation capacity of community-based organizations, our experience suggests that this approach to evaluation capacity building is applicable to institutional and government settings as well.

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