Abstract
This paper explores the program theory of the Evaluation Verkstad Practice (EVP), an evaluation capacity building endeavor described in the first presentation. A program theory can ‘lighten up’ the theories of public policies and public policy programs (McLaughlin & Jordan 1999, van der Knaap et al 2004, Weiss 1997). This paper clarifies the theory underlying the evaluation workshops, with a focus on the premises underlying (a) learning by doing, and (b) the role of the evaluator, which leads to (c) the development of learning organizations via “the loop of learning.”

Key assumptions underlying the EVP include the following. The workshop facilitator should be an experienced and skilled evaluator, with knowledge about evaluation theory and multiple methodologies. The workshop participants should bring well-structured projects for evaluation, managerial support, and be at about the same stage in the project. It is an advantage if the projects to be evaluated are diverse in origin and scope, as this diversity enhances participant learning.
**Introduction**

Although program theory was mentioned in the evaluation field as early as the 1930s, it only came to common use over the past 15 years, prompted by Weiss’s (1997) representation of her ideas about how to examine the conditions of program implementation and the mechanisms that mediate between processes and outcomes as a means to understand when and how program works. The main idea of program theory in evaluation is to make explicit the underlying assumptions about how programs are expected to work, and then to use this theory to guide the evaluation. Some years earlier Chen (1990) had presented similar ideas about Theory-driven Evaluation as a means to evaluate programs. In Chen’s work, program theory for evaluation is both normative and causative. Chen and Rossi (1992) argued that the stakeholders were the ones to clarify the normative theory underlying the program idea, especially when the program has a poor design. The causative theory, on the other hand, ought to reflect the concrete causal processes and should be based on social science knowledge. Knowledge of the causal processes will help stakeholders, in turn, to understand why things happen or not.

What Weiss discussed was further elaborated by Pawson and Tilley (1997) in terms of realistic evaluation which they define as “empirical observation to analyze the causal relations between context, mechanisms and outcome”. Later on Hanna Foss Hansen (2005) discussed this by questioning “What works for whom in which context?” She stressed that program theory is reconstructed and assessed via empirical analysis. Program theory evaluation is about the core question of all evaluations: to open up the black box of the program, uncover mechanisms to revise, and further develop the program theory. To do this you have to know only something about the program at hand but also about social science research that reveals the mechanisms of change. Donaldson (2007) suggested the following definition of program theory-driven evaluation science:

...the systematic use of substance knowledge about phenomena under investigation and scientific methods to improve and to produce knowledge and feedback about and to determine the merit, worth and significance of evaluands such as social, educational, health, community and organization programs. (p 9)
Because of the popularity of program theory ideas for evaluation and because of the proliferation of terms and concepts, there remains confusion about the similarities and differences between theory-driven evaluation, theory-oriented evaluation, program theory, logic models, and so forth. As Rogers et al (2000) define it, all versions of program theory can be summarized in a diagram featuring inputs, activities, and outcomes:

- The simplest program theory shows a single intermediate outcome by which the program achieves its ultimate outcome.
- More complex program theories show a series of intermediate outcomes, sometimes in multiple strands that combine to cause the ultimate outcomes.
- The most complex program theory consists of a series of boxes labelled inputs, processes, outputs and outcomes (on a short-term, intermediate and long-term basis). It’s not necessarily specified which processes lead to which outcome but the components are rather listed in each box.

These portrayals may or may not identify the underlying causal mechanisms that translate inputs and activities into outcomes. As argued by McLaughlin & Jordan (1999) a logic model expresses what resources and which activities have to take place to achieve which outputs and, for the customer, which outcomes on short-term, intermediate, and long-term basis. Weiss (1997) pointed out that a lot of evaluations have been conducted and based on an implementation theory that specified the activities and some intermediate outcomes, rather than on a programmatic theory that specified the mechanisms of change.

To develop a program theory of EVP we are looking for the mechanisms that underlie changes from the experiences provided. I would like to consider a program theory as a dynamic model for developing a theory, or as Rogers et al (2007) express it, to use program theory models for improving rather than for proving. When it comes to a program theory of EVP the existing one is limited theory of which activities will lead to which outcomes. So, we have to develop a program theory very carefully, and we have to evaluate and thus improve the program theory by empirical research as well as common theory from multiple disciplines. This is what Rogers et al (2000) mention as program theory used to guide the daily actions and decisions (formative
evaluation) as distinct from program theory used to test the program theory (summative evaluation).

To develop a program theory of EVP it is essential not only to elaborate a logic model but also to ask evaluative questions to ameliorate the program theory of EVP. We need a formative evaluation to guide the construction and revision of a program theory of EVP. In this paper, I try to apply a program theory perspective as a formative evaluation to guide the construction of a more explanatory program theory of the EVP.

**The program theory of EVP**

In this paper, a program theory perspective is used to clarify the program theory of EVP, which is a “workshop” that consists of 6-8 projects and “constitutes a form of learning for the purposes of capacity building” (see Karlsson Vestmans paper for further elaboration). It is a systematic approach to conducting evaluations in welfare organisations that goes beyond taking a course in evaluation. It brings together welfare work professionals to conduct evaluations of their own practice within the framework of the same practice but under the guidance of researchers/professional evaluators. The setting is a group of participants from welfare organisations with workshop leaders from a R&D unit or an academic setting. It is of great importance that the participants in the EVP bring well structured evaluation assignments from their organizations. The purpose and the expected outcomes of the participation in the EVP is professional development for the individual as well as for the organizations’ general level of evaluation knowledge (see Karlsson et al paper for further description of EVP).

**How can the program theory of EVP be expressed?**

The role of the process leader is important; it has to be a well-skilled evaluator to lead the process and tool learning. The process leader is supposed to have conducted a lot of evaluations and be familiar with evaluations models as well as evaluation and research methods, both qualitative and quantitative. The participants in the EVPs ought to have well-structured projects, a consent from their manager to participate in the workshop, and be at about the same stage in the project. It is an advantage that
the projects represent different areas of social welfare; the aim of the EVPs is the evaluation not the intervention who is evaluated.

*Fig 1.* A model of processes and outcomes for capacity building in organizations with the help of EVP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EVP structure</th>
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<td>Participants with evaluation commissions.</td>
<td>Group discussions and group dynamic.</td>
<td>Evaluation reports which can be well structured and published as R&amp;D report or just a written report from the evaluation.</td>
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<td>EVP leaders (2) with evaluation knowledge and knowledge about the activities being evaluated.</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time frame (1-1½year).</td>
<td>Mini-lectures.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sharing experiences about the evaluation being done (main issue) and the activity which is evaluated.</td>
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<th>Short term outcomes</th>
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The figure above is expressed as a logic model and represents a beginning tool for developing a program theory of EVPs. We plan, for instance, to administer a questionnaire to former participants about their experience of participating in an
EVP. The questionnaire will have questions about how they were recruited (see L Niklasson’s paper for further elaboration), when they participated and if they completed the EVP, as well as questions about the structure of the EVP (the time period, the leaders and their skills, how many projects/activities were evaluated in the EVP and if their evaluation commissions were well structured), questions about the process and content, and finally several questions about the participants’ own experiences of participating in the EVP. The participants will also be asked to express their opinion about extent and content of the lectures, and of the evaluation knowledge and utilization gained. Moreover there are several questions about EVP as a tool for capacity building. Objections can be expressed about if these questions only serve as a foundation for proving whether the EVP works or not rather than serving as a tool for the development of the program theory of EVPs. However we also search for research about the links between process and outcomes as some of the papers in the session is related to. Moreover it is also essential to focus on group processes and relational dynamics as these processes are designed to promote learning, not just from leader to participants but also among the participants – both about evaluation and about their own substantive domains of work. These processes are also designed to advance a bottom-up development of evaluation expertise in the social welfare sector. These processes may further on foster the development of social networks of support and exchange that endure beyond the time frame of the EVP.

What are some important priorities for an evaluation of the EVP?

The specific objectives of the EVP include (Greene 2008):

- To advance learning about evaluation among individual welfare professional participants, as well as their ability to conduct evaluations in their own workplaces
- To enhance the capacity of organizations within the welfare sector to conduct evaluations of their programs and initiatives
- To promote the conduct of useful and defensible evaluations in the social welfare sector
- To help cultivate a culture of evaluation amongst welfare professionals and organizations

And more broadly, to augment the quality and effectiveness of welfare services and programs.
Some EVPs have been funded by local municipalities, seeking to enhance the evaluation expertise and capacity of their own local welfare sector. In these cases, additional workshop objectives include:

- To strengthen working relationships and foster mutual respect between university faculty, on the one hand, and local professional government and welfare workers, on the other
- To enhance the visibility, presence, and prestige of the university within local communities
- To heighten the respect and esteem accorded welfare professionals

And again, to augment the quality and effectiveness of welfare services and programs.

The EVP is clearly intended to promote individual-level learning and group support for that learning, that is, to enhance the capacity of the individual welfare practitioner to conduct useful and defensible evaluations. The ways in which the Verkstad is designed to enhance the capacity of welfare programs or organizations to adopt a strong evaluative culture and to routinize evaluative thinking and practices within the structures of the organization/program are less clear. Some of the evaluation questions for an evaluation of the EVP might be:

- What might some of these ways be? And more importantly, to what extent is the Verkstad designed around and oriented to institutional or programmatic evaluation capacity building? And to what extent should it be?

The EVP is also dedicated to evaluative learning, notably participant learning about evaluation. Related to this, some of the evaluation questions to this might be:

- In what ways does or should the Verkstad advance the ideals of evaluation for learning, that is, position evaluation primarily in service of learning (rather than decision making, accountability, and so forth)? And are there other important kinds of learning that the Verkstad is promoting, or should consider promoting?
Evaluation for organizational learning and change → becoming a learning organization

One response within the evaluation community to such trends as globalization, increasing complexity, the importance of systems thinking, and the rapid and dynamic pace of change in societies around the globe is to position evaluation as a vehicle that can help organizations to be flexible and agile, to maintain their compass, and to survive even thrive. As presented by Preskill and Torres (1999, p. xix):

How can evaluative inquiry contribute to the development, maintenance, and growth of organizations in a dynamic, unstable, unpredictable environment? What we propose ... is that evaluative inquiry can not only be a means of accumulating information for decision making and action (operational intelligence) but that it also can be equally concerned with questioning and debating the value of what we do in organizations.

Evaluation in this framework is envisioned and enacted in service of developing and maintaining a flexible, adaptive, agile learning organization. Key processes required for this evaluation approach are dialogue; reflection; asking questions; and identifying and clarifying values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge.

In what ways, if any, does this framework fit or make sense for the EVP?

Thus we can create a new figure of the program theory which will also reflect the evaluation questions in addition to the logic model:
**Fig 2. An evaluative model of the program theory of EVP.**

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**Is it important how the participants are recruited?**

**How important is the content of the meetings? Could there be other factors to enhance learning and capacity building?**

**Is it important to write a report? To what extent? How does it affect learning?**

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Conclusion and further research about EVP

The data collected from EVPs so far include only end-of-EVP participant responses to a questionnaire including a group discussion around the same topics. To summarize these data, participants provided very positive feedback on their experiences in the EVPs, though also lamented the lack of time to do the evaluation work required in the EVPs alongside their regular duties. Moreover participants also underscored the difficult balance between individual and group needs in the EVP. The quality of the reports varied a lot, from low to quite high.

Major topics for future studies might have to do with the pedagogical form actually enacted in the EVPs and the learning or rather organizational change that has taken place at participants’ workplaces. This has to do with the challenge of internal compared to external evaluation or rather the learning theory that best captures the learning processes in the EVPs and the hypothesis that the EVPs are affecting organizational learning in the welfare sector in addition to individual learning (further elaborated in O Karlsson Vestmans paper). For further development of EVPs we require information regarding the participation of the participants, their support for such participation, and if and in what ways this relates to the quality of the individual participants’ experiences in the EVP. Moreover we have to do research on what the nature of the participants’ learning in the EVPs is; what do they learn about and what accounts for this learning? Some of these question can be answered by the questionnaire on a testing the hypothesis about EVPs level and some of the questions require more explorative research.

References


