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Abstract

Today dialogue is a frequent used idea in the discourse of evaluation. Dialogue stands for an ambition to involve different stakeholder in open and power-free exchange of opinions and ideas about what is evaluated. The aim with this article is to give an example on how to manage dialogue in practice. An evaluation case study is used to illustrate how the evaluators manage a dialogue in different phases of the evaluation process. To handle the sometimes-difficult situation with many different views on the subject, the evaluator developed different, sometimes new and innovative methods to make the exchange of ideas possible. The article shows that dialogue in evaluation need to be adjustable to different situations and need among the participants.

Key-words: Critical incidents, democratic evaluation, metaphors, stakeholder participation, Socratic dialogue.

CRITICAL DIALOGUE: ITS VALUE AND MEANING

Ove Karlsson

Introduction

Evaluation may be looked upon as a place for democratic processes (Mark, Henry & Julnes, 2000). Therefore, it is important to discuss how to conduct evaluations in a manner that makes it for everyone's voice to be heard in the evaluation process. One idea is to establish a dialogue among the different stakeholder groups involved in the evaluation. I see dialogue as a platform – a plaza – i.e. an open space for an exchange of ideas and a process where we examine our thoughts in order to understand the content of our thinking. When we communicate and share meanings in a dialogue we can leave “the plaza”, hopefully as more enlightened people, better able to make informed decisions.

The purpose of in this article is to illustrate through example make dialogical approach to the practice of stakeholder evaluation. The evaluation model used in the example is in the tradition of democratic evaluation. That is, as MacDonald (1987) put it, the evaluator recognises value pluralism and seeks to present the range of interests in his or her issue of formulation. The basic value is an informed citizenry, and the evaluator acts as broker of exchanges of information between groups who seek knowledge of and about each other. The evaluation model is also in the tradition of deliberative democracy (House & Howe, 1999) which means that the evaluation must be inclusive, deliberative, dialogical, and concerned with ideas of participation and mediated forms of public reason among citizens with diverse moral doctrines.

In line with House and Howe's reasoning, dialogue can help us to develop our thoughts and to be aware of our values. For example, an ideal in today's Western informa

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tion society says you must know what you want and be able to make quick decisions. To show uncertainty, especially for a manager, is undesirable. Instead, you must have the appearance of a strong decision-maker who never hesitates. This ideal can lead to hasty, poorly informed judgements when making important decisions. Here, dialogue could play an important role by encouraging more careful scrutiny of the problem at hand. There is also a strong tendency in society and in politics to view all problems from a technical and administrative perspective. This perspective characterises all problems as puzzles of varying complexity, which have demonstrably correct solutions. These problems can be referred to as “tame”. At the same time, there are many “wild” problems of such as abortion, euthanasia, social justice, the quality of education, social work, etc. (Harmon & Mayer, 1986). These dilemmas contain political, moral, and ethical questions that must be considered in a more reflective, humble and thoughtful way. When struggling with these problems, we must recognise that doubt is not a sign of weakness, but rather a sign that decisions are receiving the kind of scrutiny they deserve. I think this recognition can be accomplished through dialogue.

Different Concepts of Dialogue

There are different definitions of dialogues that complement each other. Bohm (1996) defined dialogue by describing exchange of opinions and information in three forms: Everyday (ordinary) conversation, discussion and dialogue. The discourse of conversation is a spontaneous movement between asking and answering questions about each other's live. The aim is to establish, maintain, or develop social contact. The discourse of discussion is an exchange of opinions in a negotiation context. Discussion emphasises the idea of analysis, but will not take us very far beyond our various points of view. The aim is to decide how things are or should be. The discourse of dialogue is an exchange of ideas and meanings, and the purpose is of learning more than judging.

Buber (1961) defined three types of dialogue: technical, debate and genuine. The technical dialogue is a form of parallel monologues where two or more people come together in the same room, but in fact are talking to themselves without interest in what the others have to say. The debate is also a “false” dialogue very similar to a discussion in a negotiation context, i. e. most often a situation where various people state their opinions, theories, and whatever reasons or evidence they have to support their opinions. The communication that takes place is often like bargaining or negotiation. The aim is to decide about how things are or should be. A dialogue, on the other hand, is an exchange of ideas and meanings that develop our thoughts and promotes awareness of our thoughts and values. In a dialogue nobody is trying to win. Everybody wins if nobody wins. In a genuine dialogue, forming the “I” and the “you” as a mutual and reciprocal relationship is an integral part of the game. “I” enter into the dialogue to gain knowledge and “you” do the same, and thereby we form a “we” (a companionship) that can help us learn. In this relationship “I” do not treat you as an “it”, but as a “Thou” according to Buber (1970). That does not mean that the goal is to reach consensus between the participants. Neither is the dialogue merely limited to a discussion or exchange between a few participants.

Buber presented a concept of dialogue that presupposes a close face-to-face relation. The dialogue can also be established as an exchange of experiences and knowledge over time and space, between different social groups and cultures. Bakhtin (1981) and Ricoeur (1991) proposed such a concept of dialogue. There is also a difference in the concept of dialogue when it comes to the question of conflict and consensus. Buber (1961) and Gadamer (1975) argued that the important elements in dialogue are listening and understanding. The goal is to come as close as possible to the other's point of view and to understand it from "the inside" (Gallagher, 1992; Weinsheimer, 1985, 1991). An alternative to this dialogue of reconciliation is a dialogue that does not strive for consensus.

Examples of Dialogue

As an illustration of Bakhtin's and Ricoeur's ideas of dialogue, consider the evaluation I am conducting of an educational program conducted by Swedish International Development Agency (Sida). The program, which began in 1998 involves 160 social workers in the Leningrad district. As an important part of the program the Russian social workers visit Sweden in small groups over a three-year period to study various projects and to learn from Swedish colleagues. The evaluation of the program is formative and based on a dialogue between the evaluator and the Russian participants. Together we examine different interpretations of several basic concepts used in the discourse of social welfare and social work in both countries. In this dialogue over time and cultures different interpretations are explored before judging the program processes and results (Karlsson, 2002).

Another example of these ideas of dialogue is the case presented in this article. During the first two phases of the evaluation the dialogues consisted of "communication that permits distance and space", and during the third phase a kind of dialogue more similar to what Buber describes as a "close face-to-face relation".

The Evaluator as a Critical Inquirer

I think it should be emphasised that evaluation performance is not merely a process of putting information together as pure facts to be presented to different stakeholder groups for their knowledge. What we call information always involves an act of human judgement. From a critical perspective this act of judgement is an interpretative act. According to Kincheloe and McLaren (1998) "the interpretation of theory, critical analysts contend, involves understanding the relationship between the particular and the whole and between the subject and the object of analysis. Such a position contradicts the traditional empiricist contention that theory is basically a matter of classifying objective data" (p. 274).

Reason (1998) describes the critical subjectivity in this way.

Critical subjectivity is a state of consciousness different from either the naive subjectivity of 'primary process' and the attempted objectivity of egoic 'secondary process' awareness. Critical subjectivity means that we do not suppress our primary subjective experience, that we attempt that our knowing is from a perspective; it also means that we are *aware* of that perspective and of its bias, and we *articulate* it in our communications. Critical subjectivity involves a self-reflexive attention to the ground on which one is standing and thus is very close to what Bateson (1972) describes as 'Learning III'. (p. 267)

The critical role of the evaluator could be to question and probe into the heart of the matter, asking for explanations and stimulating reflection on underlying assumptions. That means to be more of a “critical inquirer” than “merely” an understand-oriented evaluator.

A Socratic Dialogue

The critical and learning dialogue in evaluation is in the spirit of Socrates. The Socratic dialogue is not primarily a matter of defending one’s own beliefs while criticising what others believe. The essence is to become clear about oneself, one’s knowledge, ignorance, etc., together with other people. This is especially true when the knowledge is tied to the participants as in the stakeholder evaluation. The aim of Socratic dialogue is to find the knowledge or insight that the participants already have, although they are unaware that it is within reach. Reflection and dialogue make it accessible. The following quote from Maranhão (1986) shows some of the essence in Socrates dialogue.

Plato’s philosophy is a political project, while Socrates is the activist in the dialogues. It differs from politics, as we have come to understand it, in that it has an element of philosophy in the sense of a quest for the truth, an element of education that attempts to persuade its readers of the truth, and an element of therapy in its plight to unravel the truth within the soul of each interlocutor, thus redressing righteousness in him. (p. 178)

The Socratic dialogue generally focuses on one or a few important concepts: “What is knowledge?” or “What is justice?” Transformed to evaluation questions, these concepts become: What have we learned from the evaluation and what can we say about justice in this evaluation? What values are held about this program, policy, etc? (Karlsson, 1998).

The aim of this critical examination in this form is to gain practical and theoretical knowledge about how we ought to live and how the world is. Another aim should be to develop a deeper understanding of what the program means for different stakeholders in terms of limitations and possibilities, and to reach a greater insight and clarity concerning the foundations of one’s own and others judgements. Ideally, through this process each party in the dialogue is enlightened, thus able to make insightful and informed decisions and more willing to change an unjust situation. At the same time fully aware of the limits of her/his own perspective, and of the possibilities and limitations of reaching a complete understanding of how things really are.

The Case: Evaluation of After-school Centres

Ryan and Johnson (2000) call for more practical examples of democratic evaluation.

While democratically oriented evaluation approaches have significantly advanced evaluation theory, there is a lack of concrete, specific strategies for dealing in practice with the complex issues these approaches address. Further, the advantages and challenges of implementing deliberative democratic evaluation have not been addressed. How does deliberative evaluation fare in practice? (p. 40)

Consider the following example. From 1985-1990 I evaluated a 5-year program that provides care and leisure services for children ages 9-12 in Eskilstuna, a municipality with about 90.000 inhabitants in central Sweden. The program aimed for more efficient organi-

sation of such services. The politicians wanted to know how the municipality could implement the new National curriculum for After-school centres. Politicians asked how these centres could be organised, and with what possible pedagogical content, what the services would cost, and what children and parents wanted the centres to be. The evaluation project consisted of different types of evaluation, namely a needs assessment, formative evaluation and summative evaluation with different features and goals in order to adjust it to the various stages in the programming of the centres.

Background

Since 1975 municipalities in Sweden have been required by law to provide all children with childcare services (including After-schools centres) if parents want such service. Before that this service was mainly a part of the government social policy. It was perceived as an affair of social welfare for socially deprived children and children of single mothers. During the 1960's the demand for childcare services was based on arguments that both women and men should combine parenthood and work, and the services became a part of the government's labour policy. This is still one main argument, but since the early 1970's an increasing emphasis has been placed on support for children's physical, social, cognitive and emotional development, and on their leisure time outside school. This is a need not only for children in pre-school ages, and young school age children 7-8 years old, but also for 9-12 year olds. In the mid 1980's only about 8 per cent of the 9-12 age group had a place in public After-school centres. There was a great need for expanding the services and the politicians asked how that expansion could be organised and provided. A great need for development of different forms of After-school centres was identified on the national level. With subsidy from the state several programs were started in the municipalities with the aim of developing new ideas and testing different forms of After-school centres for children 9-12 years of age. Examples of the new ideas that were tried out were open-door activities and centres run by volunteer organisations or by parents.

Context of Evaluation

The politicians in Eskilstuna wanted to know how After-school centres for 9-12 years old could be organised (in what forms), with what pedagogical content (curriculum) they could work, what the centres would cost (economy), and how the children and parents wanted the centre to be, etc. The politicians in charge of the program opted for a formative stakeholder-based evaluation to follow the program during a four-year period. The aim of the evaluation was to follow how the program worked in respect to these issues and what the different stakeholder groups thought and desired. One of the first steps in the evaluation was to identify what interest groups should be involved in the evaluation. From a theory of context of the program four domains were identified: A political domain, an administrative management domain, a pedagogical professional domain and a domain of the citizens and the users. With that concept of the program context the following stakeholder groups were identified in the evaluation: Politicians, management staff, professionals and personnel, parents and children, and various co-operative parties.

The principles for the selection of representatives from each group were democratic and strategic. The aims were to obtain a broad range of interests and knowledge represented in the groups. For example, politicians from the local and the central levels in the municipality and representatives that had an interest in these centres, as well as representatives who had experience with services for younger school age children, for example parents with children in the ages 7-10 years old, etc. Schools and After-school centres for younger children were contacted. With their help a population of potential representatives was identified and asked to participate in the evaluation. There is much more to say about the problem of which bases to use for selecting representatives, however space limitations do not permit an elaboration on that problem here. Instead, I shall comment on the question of how to set up a dialogue with the stakeholder groups.

The Dialogue Model in Practice

The Evaluation design could be described as distinguishing between three phases of the program with the evaluation process connected to these phases: (1) formulation of the program and planning for the start of new centres, (2) realisation of the program plan in practice, and (3) implementation of the new centres into the ordinary organisation for school age care services in the municipality. I will take a closer look at the three phases of the evaluation from the perspective of involvement and the creation of a dialogue with the stakeholder groups.

Phase I: Dialogue to Judge what Program to Develop

The aim of the first phase of the evaluation was to explore the different stakeholder groups' expectations about, and claims on, the program. The evaluation of this phase was a form of needs assessment. According to Scriven (1991) needs assessment refers to any study of the needs, wants, market preferences, values, or ideas that might be relevant to, for example, a program. He wrote: "This enlarged sense might be called the 'value assessment' sense (or process), and it is in fact a perfectly legitimate activity when one is looking for all possible guidance in planning—or justification for continuance (or modification or termination—of a program" (pp.240f).

Needs assessment can serve for two primary functions (Stufflebeam, McCormick, Brinkerhoff and Nelson, 1985).

First, it assists in determining what needs exist and how these needs should be addressed. Second, it can provide criteria against which a program's merits can be evaluated, that is, the degree to which intended or important human needs are addressed effectively and efficiently (although in reality such use of needs assessment information is rarely observed). (p. 16)

This last remark about the lack of utilisation of assessment information is important. Guba and Lincoln (1989, p. 52) found that needs assessment too often identifies just those needs that the sponsor's product happens to be capable of fulfilling, providing response for, or which the sponsor's values dictate ought to exist as needs of the target group. Another problem is that the recommended procedure of needs assessment often follows a traditio-

nal scientific rationale managed by the researcher alone. To make the information more useful I think there's a need to bring in more of those groups that have an interest or involvement in the issues and programs in question. Here I think an emphasis on a democratic view on needs assessment and dialogue will be important.

In the first phase of the evaluation in Eskilstuna I collected information from the stakeholders using different methods. I surveyed parents and interviewed other stakeholder groups on the following issues: What is the politicians aim of the program? What do parents want the program to be? What is required to manage such a program? What do the staff unions require? What expectations are there from professionals who work in this field? What expectations do the children have? The results were combined and analysed with traditional qualitative and quantitative methods, and summarised into a "wish list" of preferences for a good centre.

Observing that the aim in this phase of the evaluation was to show possible concepts of centres to consider in the planning, I was not satisfied with just presenting a "favourite wish list" for criteria and claims from the stakeholder groups. Certainly, such an aggregated list could have been of use as a checklist in the planning of the centres. The problem was that it gave no perceptible vision of what the centres would be like. Therefore, I searched for another way to compile the results that could show the different ideas of After-school centres. Inspired by House's (1983) discussion I found that metaphors could be a useful and powerful instrument to handle the problem.

According to Kaminsky (1999) the real power of metaphors resides not in their capacity to give shape to phenomena but rather their ability to problematize the meaning and values that people attribute to phenomena. She pointed out that metaphors are valuable to the interpretation of data, i. e. different statements that you find, for example, in interviews with stakeholders. The metaphors have the power to shift our attention away from the "product" of the statement and back to the "process" of meaning making. Kaminsky also commented on the question of how to conduct metaphors.

First, we can draw on what we know about principled, rigorous evaluation. Our work is more than taking at face value the stories we're told. It's about questioning the contradictions that we see between what people say and what they do. It's about taking apart variation rather than dismissing or ignoring it if it doesn't "fit" the plot. It's about understanding the multiple plot lines that intersect and diverge, braid and unravel. (p. 163)

Creation and use of metaphors

In an effort to shift from analysing the data through a carefully constructed coding system, I turned to the list of criteria collected from the stakeholder groups to construct metaphors that could capture the essence in different concepts of the services. The following examples are no complete list, but they give an idea of what claims were formulated by the stakeholders for an "ideal centre". According to the list the centre should be like a cosy home environment giving children safety; be a place free from structured plans for their recreation time and without adults telling them what to do; give children social contact with other children and adults; support children's learning in school, and help with their homework. At the same time be open to the society; give recreation; have quiet activities but

also opportunities to work with practical things, concrete activities, and work with their hands, sports activities, etc.

I analysed the claims to search for clustering of meanings that could distinguish between various kinds of ideal types of After-school centres. The results were presented in the form of metaphors that distinguished between four ideal types. These metaphors captured the essence of the stakeholders' ideal centre. The metaphors also gave a base for identifying criteria for evaluating the centres in the second phase of the evaluation.

- *"The Workshop" metaphor*: Gives a notion of an ideal-type of After-school centres where the aims are to do practical things, concrete activities, work with the hands. Use concrete materials as wood, metal, paper, etc.
- *"The Classroom" metaphor*: Shows a type of centre where the children are supposed to learn new things in connection with the school curriculum to support the teaching in school.
- *"The Coffee bar" metaphor*: Shows a centre where the ideal is openness, social contact, variety, recreation, freedom and the chance for children to be among friends doing what they want without anyone telling them what to do
- *"The Living room" metaphor*: The ideal type here is a home environment, to come to a warm and cosy place after school that provides safety and the opportunity to engage in quiet activities.

Through these four metaphorical lenses it was possible to illuminate different ideals for how a program should be. I used the metaphors in a dialogue with stakeholder representatives to critically examine what underlying values the stakeholder groups saw as important in their desired After-school centres. Let me give an example from a dialogue with a group of parents to school age children 9-12 years old.

Example 1: Evaluators in a meeting with a group of parents

Evaluator:	Reading your lists of claims for a good centre I find it difficult to get a clear picture of what it is you really want. On one hand you want the centres to be a cosy, homelike atmosphere, and on the other hand to become an active learning environment more to compare with a classroom. Does any of these four metaphors of After-school centres capture what you would like? (Presenting the metaphors).
Parents:	Talks about the differences and the strengths and weaknesses in the different ideal types illustrated. Two favourite metaphors are held "The living room" and "The Classroom".
Evaluator:	If you have to prioritise, which one of these ideal types would you choose?
Parents:	Why not make combinations, taking the best part from each ideal type and create something new.
Evaluator:	What values would be of most importance in that new ideal type?
The dialogue continues and as a result the participants develop a more elaborated picture of what the School Age childcare centre is and could be like.	

The result from the first phase of evaluation could be summarised. First, I got an elaborated concept of After-school centres with help of metaphors. Through a dialogue on these metaphors it was possible to elaborate criteria for the evaluation of such centres in practice.

Second, in a process of communication with the stakeholders I got a sense of how to establish a dialogue that gave the parties opportunities to develop their thoughts, ideas and preferences of School Age childcare centres. Third, the dialogue gave an opportunity to develop a more elaborate list of criteria for evaluation of the program in practice.

Phase II: Dialogue to evaluate the program in practice

In the second phase I focused on how the program for centres was implemented in practice. Ten centres opened in 1986 and fifteen more the year after, 25 in all, serving 500 students. Various methods were used to evaluate the program in practice.. An important method for data collection with children was participatory observations at the centres. In all, the evaluator spent two weeks at each of six centres. The centres were selected to give the broadest range of types of institutions in which the centres were integrated (schools, day-care centres, youth recreation centres, etc). Data collection from other stakeholder groups consisted of group interviews with tape-recorders used to document the dialogue.

To establish a dialogue

In the evaluation I employed a “bottom-up” approach by first asking children how they experienced the centres. Next, parents and professionals were interviewed, then managers and politicians. The reason to keep the group homogenous was to try to get as power-free a situation as possible. I thought that could be better achieved if I didn’t mixed the groups of children with, for example, representatives for parents, or the parents’ group with staff-representatives, or the staff-groups meeting with representatives for managers, etc. As in the example given above I strove to qualify the judgements from the stakeholders about their likes and dislikes by making them explain in more detail what values they saw as important with reference to what After-school centre milieu they preferred. The dialogue element in this process was mainly through the presentation of what different groups had said and what they wanted to protect and change in the centres. The evaluator presented the evaluation results from each group in terms of claims about how to develop the centres. These claims were presented to the decision-makers on the next level in the organisation for consideration and comments.

Example 2: Evaluators meeting with staff personnel

- Evaluator: Here's what the parents and the children are saying: The centres should be more like a combination of living room and classroom, providing safety and also stimulation and help with homework. What is your reaction?
- Staff: Dialogue about different ways to conceptualise what good After-school centres would be like. They compared their current practice with this different ideal types formulated by the staff, parents and children.
- Evaluator: What do you need to change to come closer to these ideals?
- Staff: We must listen to what the children and their parents want. They have interesting ideas about the centres. At the same time, as professionals, we must be respected for the educational programme that we have the responsibility to provide.
- Evaluator: Is that programme to be more as a "workshop" independent of, for example, what the school teachers are planning in their teaching with the children?
- Staff: Yes, but at the same time, we must co-operate both with parents and school-teachers.
- Evaluator: Is it a problem to do that?
- Staff: We need more time and resources, and also respect for our professional role as pedagogues. We know what the children want. The children like to be active, do things that we plan together.
- Evaluator: What do you like to say to your managers and to the politicians about this situation?
- Staff: They must give us more active support, and also more in-service training to handle the program.

Example 3: Evaluators meeting with politicians

- Evaluator: The staff in the centres complains that they don't get good support from the management and the politicians. What is your comment on that?
- Politicians: The budget is limited, and we must give priority to many needs. Here the staff must be professional and try to manage the situation. They must give the children more freedom to choose and teach them to take responsibility for their own activities.
- Evaluator: As I understand your idea the centres must give freedom for the children to come and go as they please, with a minimum of obligatory program to follow. Do you think that the ideal type for the centres would be a form of 'Café'?
- Politicians: Raising the children is the parent's, not the society's responsibility. Also we must cut down the costs for the centre. Here an overly ambitious program takes a lot of time and needs more personnel.
- Evaluator: How can the centre fulfil the responsibilities to the National Curriculum then? And what do you say about the claim from the parents for a calm and homelike environment?
- Politicians: It is important to listen to what the parents want for their children. At the same time we must take responsibility for the budget, and to make it possible to fulfill the National Curriculum. It does not have to be conflicting goals but at the same time there are no simple answers how to balance the different claims. We think it is important to try to establish a democratic and ongoing dialogue with different stakeholders to try to find good solutions.

In this process of dialogue with the different stakeholder groups the metaphors were used to illuminate the possible way the centres could be. For stakeholders having one favourite metaphor/ideal type of centre, the metaphors also helped to see different perspectives on the evaluand. In that way the metaphors provided important help for the advancement of knowledge and understanding of other points of view and references held by other stakeholders. Metaphors encourage different ways of thinking, which enabled the stakeholder

groups' participants to focus upon, explain, and influence various aspects of a complex organisational phenomenon. This is an important observation to develop further in the practice of a dialogue-directed evaluation.

Phase III: Dialogue for deliberation and learning

In the first two stages of the evaluation, the dialogue did permit distance among participants. In the third phase of the evaluation, my goals were to create a face-to-face dialogue and to establish mutual and reciprocal relationships. At the same time I knew that it could be difficult to get everyone in an audience to actively participate in a dialogue. Therefore I looked for a way to "loosen up" the situation and to help the participants that felt unsure to take part in the dialogue. The idea that I tried was to engage a theatre group which specialised on "discussion theatre". Four actors were engaged and together we selected critical incidents or situations that could illustrate the conflicts or difficulties that I had observed in the centres. For example situations of conflicts between different roles/actors in the organisation, co-operation problems between the centres and the schoolteachers, the parents etc. Depending on differences in the view on how the centres should be like.

The theatrics performance

The actors took different roles and portrayed the situation. After 3-4 minutes when the situation was made clear one of the actors suddenly froze the action and turned to the audience for help. "What shall I say to this man/woman? Do we have any parents in the audience who could help me explain my standpoint?" The actor got some advice and returned to the play again, using the suggested reply. The actors froze the action in several places and after a while the play became a debate among the participants in the audience. The dialogue went on for about 45 minutes and then the actors made room /time for a final comment before shifting to the next scene.

An important aspect of the dialogue is to strive to make it as "power-free" as possible, giving everyone a chance to explain his/her standpoint or reflection on the subject. Here the actors play an important role in balancing the situation. If the dialogue in the audience tends to be more of a debate and people begin to argue their viewpoint without listening to what others have to say, the actors take over the "play" and calm down the situation. The actors could also help a person that is in a weak position to explain his/her point of view. If a person came under attack, an actor could take that person's role, as for example a parent, and give an response, thus balancing the power in the dialogue.

Critical incidents

The difficult question in this "discussion-theatre" is to choose good examples from the evaluation data to use in the performances. The core questions were identified through the method of "critical incidents". Patton (1990) describes critical incidents or cases as those "that can make a point quite dramatically or are, for some reason, particularly important in the scheme of things." (p. 174)

Critical incidents showing the essence of a problem were identified in the evaluation and transformed to scenes for the actors to play. Below I give three examples of critical incidents.

- *Co-operation between the centres and the schoolteacher.* The centres plan activities to increase knowledge about the municipality and other institutions in society (hospitals, elderly care centres, etc.). The schools looked upon these activities in terms of competition and did not wish to co-operate. The manager and the educator invited the teachers to the centre in order to discuss the co-operation.
- *Co-operation with parents.* Some centres asked the children to set up a household budget, with the aim to create awareness about the living expenses of a family. The educators invented different cases of family situations that all children could identify with. Furthermore, the children were asked to go home and find out about their own family's expenses and make a budget of their own. One parent reacted negatively, claiming that the project violated the privacy of the families. The parent went to the centre to discuss the matter with the manager and the educator.
- *Dress code at work.* A young educator at one of the centres had a punk-inspired style with coloured hair and lots of jewellery. The children admired her and thought of her as a "cool adult". One parent had complained, arguing that this style was not appropriate for someone working with children. The parent also thought the educator could be a dangerous role model for the children. In order to discuss the issue, a meeting with parents and staff was arranged.

In the first case, the actors played the different parts and gave the audience an idea of the current situation by using arguments both for and against a co-ordination of the various activities. The audience, consisting of staff from schools and centres as well as politicians and parents, was asked to give its opinions about the advantages and disadvantages of a developed co-operation. In the second case, the actors illustrated the somewhat lively debate between the parent and the centre staff. The audience was asked to give advice to the two parties. In the third case actors illustrated the situation with one of the actors dressed like the punk rock educator. The audience talked about the adult's responsibilities as, among other things, role models.

The dialogue in these three cases clarifies the differences in values between the stakeholder groups: Different opinions concerning the educational assignment of schools and centres, which subjects are considered private and which are open for discussion in an educational situation, freedom of choice for individuals to have a personal style. Four performances were held during a two- day period. Both daytime and evenings sessions were held to make it possible for the representatives to choose times that fitted in with their schedules. Sixty representatives from mixed stakeholder groups participated in each performance. In all, about 250 representatives participated in this arrangement of dialog about present and future After-school centres. The performances were documented by video cameras and the result has been edited to a 20 minute video to be used in meetings with parents, politicians, and staff to continue the dialogue on how to develop the After-school centres form and pedagogical content.

In sum, I think one important result of these "dialogue-theatre performances" is the learning aspect. The dialogue gave an opportunity for different stakeholders to exchange opinions, and to see things from a new perspective which hopefully helps develop one's own personal thinking on the problem.

Summary

The three-phase evaluation process and the dialogue evaluation can be summarized in the following model.

<i>Program activities:</i>		
Phase I: Formulation of policy and establishing the program	Phase II: Realisation of the program in practice	Phase III: Implementation of results into the ordinary organisation
<i>Evaluation approaches:</i>		
Needs assessment	Formative evaluation	Summative evaluation
<i>Methods and artistic tools:</i>		
Surveys, interviews and focus groups Metaphors	Participatory observations, group meetings and interviews Metaphors	Critical incidents, discussion-theatre Video-documentation
<i>Dialogue:</i>		
Dialogue over time and distance, as collective inquiry with participants	Dialogue over time and distance as a dialectic and critical method	Dialogue face-to-face as a dimension of deliberative democratic evaluation
<i>Goal:</i>		
To share meanings, ask questions, uncover assumptions, and clarify values and beliefs to understand what should be evaluated.	To critically examine and share points of view and opinions about the program and positions of respective stakeholder groups	To portray stakeholder interests and opinions; to learn about each other's ideas and come to a more complete understanding of each other's positions
<i>Evaluators role in dialogue:</i>		
Facilitator and critical inquirer, propose and develop perspective and critical examination of the evaluand	Facilitator and Socratic critical inquirer present different perspectives and critical examinations of the program	Facilitator and advocate for democracy in the dialogue between different stakeholder groups
<i>Results:</i>		
Producing knowledge about the different views and values held about the program.	Identification of claims from different stakeholder groups on the development of the program	Stakeholders come to a more complete understanding of each other's positions
<i>Product:</i>		
Summarised in four metaphors that illustrates four ideal types of centres and the basic values behind each ideal type.	Summarised in a report and base for identifying critical incidents for a dialogue in the third phase of evaluation	Producing of a Video from the performances for further discussions in meetings with parents, politicians etc.

Lessons and reflections

The usual rationale for evaluation is to collect information, present criteria to judge the information, and to choose a winner. Another way to look at evaluation is to see it as a process, a platform for reconsideration, learning and developing new thoughts about the problem, rather than judging it. The latter is probably a conception of evaluation that goes far beyond the dominating idea and rationale for evaluation in terms of judging merit and

worth. Against this background, a problem with dialogical evaluation could be to explain and develop a meaningful conception of what it is – convincingly enough to persuade the users that it is a valuable evaluation model or approach. Dialogical evaluation could be looked upon as something only for philosophers and researchers, not for an effective evaluation that answers decision-makers questions.

The evaluator has at least two responsibilities in making a critical dialogue possible: to develop a theoretical perspective on the program and to cultivate a role as a critical inquirer. "Theoretical perspective" here is used not so much as a complete model or explanation to be tested, but rather as a framework that puts the evaluand in a historical and political context that can give new insights and views to the discussion and evaluation. Furthermore, the evaluator can emphasise that there are seldom any simple answers or unambiguous results when dealing with qualified judgements such as those that can be found when evaluating social and pedagogical activities.

An aim of the dialogue should be to develop a deeper understanding of what the program means for different stakeholders in terms of limitations and possibilities, especially for disadvantaged groups in society. The outcomes of dialogue can be interpreted as a change and development of stakeholder perspective. On a weak interpretation, perspective means seeing things from another point of view. A stronger interpretation refers to self-transformation. The critical dialogue in evaluation has the intention of understanding, of "seeing through" and critically examining in order to attain increased insight. Consequently, this kind of dialogue can be described as a meditative process, where the individual examines and verifies his/her own and others' perspectives and assumptions. Each party to the dialogue pursues self-criticism and ideological criticism. The nature of the question is no longer to develop thought. It is to break up thought. Though consensus between the parties may be reached, this is not the main goal of the process. The primary goal is to reach greater insight and clarity concerning the foundations of one's own and others judgements. Ideally, this process enlightens each party so they can make insightful and informed judgements and decisions, more fully aware of the limits of her/his own perspective and of the possibilities of reaching a complete understanding.

Conducting such a dialogue directed evaluation is not easy. Achieving a balance of depth of participation and breadth of stakeholder inclusion was among the many difficulties I faced with this approach. With limited resources there is a risk that participation will be dominated by those who are resource powerful. Another crucial question is how to manage the evaluation as evaluator. Training in the facilitation of dialogue with heterogeneous groups is not a part of traditional evaluation training as Torres, et al. (2000) noted. There is a great need to develop this kind of knowledge in the repertoire of evaluation skills.

Negotiating access to a wide range of stakeholders requires some effort. Many evaluation clients and stakeholders may have limited experience with opportunities for expanded interaction within the context of an evaluation and may not readily see why they should devote time to participating. Another caution is that dialogical evaluation gives the participants a lot to think about whether or not they are open-minded and willing to really

participate. One could see a risk here of “information-overload” where participants feel they have developed a greater insight and knowledge about the evaluand, but as a result only feel more uncertain than before about what to do. Furthermore, the strategy can emphasise that there are seldom simple answers or unambiguous results when dealing with qualified judgements such as those obtained when evaluating social and pedagogical activities. That is a good insight for learning, but it will not be a good argument to use dialogical evaluation for those who want to make decisions and choices.

Another difficulty that I experienced in the evaluation was that the performances of a dialogue with the different stakeholder groups about the program goals, contents and forms, sometimes made it difficult to keep a clear boundary line between the responsibilities of the project leader and evaluator. In this formative process with the many contacts with different stakeholders I sometimes became a manager and co-ordinator of the program and not only of the evaluation. That problem is not limited to dialogue directed evaluation, but also a problem to consider in all formative evaluation when the evaluator plays an active role as advocate, educator, facilitator etc. These problems (and there are certainly many more to deal with) could make one pessimistic about the possibilities to establish a dialog-directed evaluation. Certainly the problems must not be underestimated and there is much work to be done to further develop this dialogue-directed evaluation approach. At the same time, I think the approach is a promising model for a more democratic, just and inclusive evaluation. Further, the model may prove particularly useful when the goal of the evaluation is to stimulate and support learning processes. Naturally enough I have not answered all the questions that could and should be asked on this subject. A crucial question that has to be elaborated more deeply is the meaning of “democratic evaluation”. Does it mean evaluation to promoting a democratic process, or evaluation as promoting democratic values (right of opinion, right of speech, equality before the law, social justice), or can evaluation to promote both, or at least strive to both? If it is promoting democracy as a process, what kind of process is envisioned, direct democracy or representative democracy? Another important question to discuss is how the different notions of evaluation as learning, judging, understanding, and explaining relate to this democratic and dialogue-directed evaluation.

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