Centre for Urban Health Solutions
Survey Research Unit

Methodology Bits

St. Michael's
Inspired Care.
Inspiring Science.

Developmental Evaluation
The praxis of program evaluation

Traditional program evaluation employs linear logic-based approaches to solve problems. They work well when a problem is well defined, understood, and when a single optimal solution likely exists from a selected range of possible solutions. Developmental evaluation has emerged as an alternative approach that takes into consideration problems that are dynamic, complex in nature, and require adaptive responses.
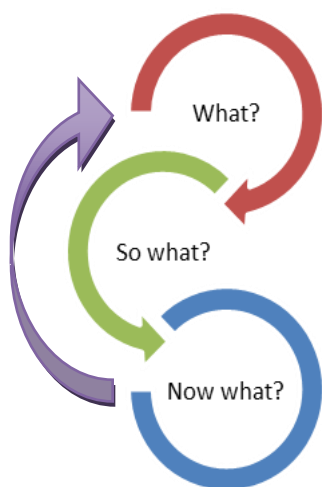
What is Developmental Evaluation?

Developmental evaluation (DE) is an evaluation approach that uses short cycles of data collection and analysis — where steps are not always clearly defined — to document progress to date and drive incremental improvements. The progress can be analyzed by asking three questions: *What? So what? Now what?* This requires the evaluator to look back and examine the results carefully. Next, they will ask, what is their significance and meaning? Now what should be done moving forward? From there, course corrections can be made as required. Conventional methods of evaluation commonly test hypotheses by relying on the predictability of outcomes to make inferences about the program.

How does it work?
What is the evaluator's role?

There is no prescribed method for conducting DE, rather, established methods are applied in novel ways, using general guiding principles. The developmental evaluator is positioned as a member of the program team as opposed to an external evaluator.

General guidelines indicate that the evaluator initially must orient themselves through research to gain a deep understanding of the problem while building strong relationships with stakeholders. From there, a learning framework is co-created with project stakeholders to align with priorities and help guide the developmental process. Once the DE process has begun, the role of the evaluator is focused on 4 activities: orienting the program team (by assisting team members to test their assumptions), watching (including nonverbal communication among team members), sense-making (identifying patterns and considering their implications), and intervening (to actively shape the work being done) (Dozois, Langlois, Blanchet-Cohen, 2010).

The work is ongoing, nimble, and relies on carefully collected data that is rapidly analyzed to help inform course corrections or new avenues of inquiry.

Developmental Evaluation compared to Formative and Summative Evaluation

	Developmental Evaluation	Formative Evaluation	Summative Evaluation
Purpose/ Objectives	• To support ongoing adaptive learning and provide real-time feedback • To support agile responses to changing understanding of complex dynamic problems • To support successful development of an innovation within a complex environment	• To support continual improvement of simple or complicated programs • To ensure effectiveness and efficiency of program/project delivery	• To examine the impact of an implemented project or program
Appropriate contexts for use	• Dynamic and volatile situations where the environment is subject to change • Where multiple pathways forward are possible and outcomes are unknown • Socially and politically complex situations • Program team is open to improvement and innovation	• Situations where ongoing monitoring is required to ensure the project is addressing a real need	• Situations where it is desired to quantify changes and outcomes resulting from program or project implementation
Guiding question(s)	• What? So what? Now what?	• Is the project going as planned? Is it meeting a real need?	• Did the project meet its stated goals?
Time frame	• Before, during, and after a program is initiated • Plan, act, evaluate overlap and these steps are often repeated	• At the outset of program or project development and throughout its implementation	• Before or after the completion of a program or project

Summary

Traditional methods of program evaluation are useful in certain circumstances, especially when the problem is well known and clearly defined. DE has emerged in response to the need to evaluate complex ("wicked") problems, where stakeholders and emerging data continually guide the direction of the project, requiring high levels of innovation. The application of DE involves testing solutions where the outcome is unclear, or where the solution may work for some aspects of the problem but not all. DE is an agile evaluation approach that can be used to help guide change in today's increasingly complex world.

Attributions are to be made to: Vidug K., Pedersen C., Aratangy, T., Smith, P., Rodrigues J., O'Campo P. Developmental Evaluation: the praxis of program evaluation. C-UHS Survey Research Unit Methodology Bits 2018 (2).

References

- Dozois, E., Langlois, M., Blanchet-Cohen, N. (2010) DE 201: A Practitioner's Guide to Developmental Evaluation, The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation
- Gamble, J. (2008) A Developmental Evaluation Primer, The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation
- Patton, M.Q. (2011) Developmental Evaluation: Applying Complexity Concepts to Enhance Innovation and Use. NY: Guilford Press.
- Patton, M.Q. (2008) Utilization-focused evaluation. (4th ed). CA: Sage Publications
- Snowden, D & Boone, M. (2007) A leader's framework for decision making. Har Bus Rev.

C-UHS Survey Research Unit Providing high-quality and efficient research and evaluation services to the health and social sciences community.

www.sru.cuhs.ca
SRU@smh.ca

St. Michael's
Inspired Care.
Inspiring Science. | Survey Research Unit