

Outline for Increased Incorporation of New Media in Evaluation Processes¹

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Today, evaluation holds a central position in the public society. But the role of the evaluator has changed over the years. From being a person during the fifties and sixties who was only responsible for measuring without following valuation – *a describer* – the evaluator during the seventies and eighties became an *assessor*, whose primary purpose was to explain any processes imaginable. Ever since, process evaluation has been in style and the role of the evaluator has been to assess the functionality of enterprises and at the same time explain why the situation is as it is. But since the nineties, evaluation has taken one step further and like the information technology entered an *interactive* generation. Not only shall the evaluator of the new generation deliver facts for decision makers, but also function as a collaborator who stimulates participation in the evaluation process, thereby guaranteeing that **evaluation results actually come to use** (Guba and Lincoln 1989). But to what extent is New Media² incorporated in evaluation processes?

Similar to Guba and Lincoln's ideal image of the evaluator of our time, Weiss (1998, p 310) considers utilization a natural product of the dissemination of evaluation results: "*Given her efforts at dissemination, the evaluator often finds that the organization begins to make changes in practice and in policy. The changes may be slow in coming, but in time the organization takes the lesson of evaluation to heart and alters the way it works*". However, as it has been frequently reported that evaluation results are not utilized to the expected extent, Weiss' positive statement could justly be questioned.

The objective of this paper is to discuss *evaluation utilization*, this from a perspective of *organizational learning*. In this context, New Media is introduced as a means to facilitate dissemination of evaluation findings.

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² New Media is defined as "any digital media production that is interactive and digitally distributed" (Wikipedia).

From use to influence

After years of research, Weiss (1998) proposes that there are four main types of use describing how officials in executive agencies and legislatures use research information:

1. *Guidance for action* where results are used as direction for changes in program and policy.
2. *Reinforcement of prior beliefs* is when evaluation findings affirm what people already know and believe about the pitfalls in the program. It bolsters the confidence of those who want to press for needed change.
3. *Mobilization of support* occurs when evaluation findings are used to mobilize a coalition of support for change. The findings become ammunition in organizational debates.
4. *Enlightenment* is when evaluation results are used for a general increase in understanding and people learn more about what happens in the program and afterwards. They gain a better idea of program strengths, fault lines and opportunities for improvement.

In addition, Henry and Mark (2003) has stated that evaluation use is generally understood to refer to *direct action* that has occurred as a response to an evaluation (instrumental use), something that is *newly learned* about a program, its participants, its operations, or outcomes (conceptual use), the *action or learning* that takes place as a result of evaluation findings, or as a result of participation in evaluation procedures (process use), or the use of evaluation to claim a *rational basis for action*, or inaction, or to justify pre-existing positions (symbolic use). Given this taxonomy, Henry and Mark conclude that evaluators often strive for instrumental use of their evaluations. However, as Weiss (1980, p 154) comments, "*the key is that research is used but usually not in the ways to which observers have been attentive*". She thereby argues that the guidance for action category is the least common among her proposed four categories.

Weiss' fundamental taxonomy of use is based on research on evaluation use in the mid-1970s to very early-1980s, a time that Henry and Mark (2003, p 294) call the "*golden age' of research on evaluation use*". After reviewing the literature, they conclude that research on use has expanded the taxonomy of forms of use, highlighting the notion of **process use**. In addition to this, they provide an alternative framework to specify and organize the ways that evaluation can be expected to influence changes in attitudes and actions at the individual, interpersonal, and collective levels. This can be viewed as synonymous with the academic discourse surrounding **organizational learning**.

Organizational learning

Organizational learning theory is primarily concerned with *how organizations learn*, in comparison to learning organization theory that asks the questions how organizations should learn, what the practices are that characterize effective and adaptive organizations, and what the processes that facilitate learning in organizations are? (Perkins et al 2007). Thus, organizational learning (OL) is a concept that basically captures the capacity of a system to recognize its need for changes, to explore opportunities for innovations, and to invent and implement strategies that help it better address the needs of its people (Sabah and Orthner 2007).

Organizational learning is of interest in the evaluation context since strategic change and renewal in an organization – core values for any evaluator – is founded on organizational learning. This is, according to Kira (2003, s 108f), manifested by a dynamic process in which individual intuition becomes gradually shared and refined at the group level:

An individual may reconstruct past experiences in a new way or build new insights by, for instance, detecting new connections between things or new opportunities that no-one else has realized before; she learns. The individual then transmits these new intuitions to others and aims to interpret her ideas to them. The intuitions often become transformed and refined in this phase; conversations and dialogue develop the new intuitions further into a shared cognition. In the next phase, integration takes place. A shared understanding of a new way of doing things emerges and a new type of concrete collective action is carried out; a change in the ways to work and collaborate may be detected and, in terms of Barley and Tolbert, a new script is being born. However, in order not to vanish, the new shared understandings have to become institutionalized. The new learning is captured into tasks, routines, and structures when, through dialogue and also silent practice, new institutionalized ways to work and collaborate are formed. From this point on, the new institutionalized »truths« start to steer and guide the operation of an organization and affect what people do and how they do it.

A sketch of how this is assumed to function in its ideal form is presented in Figure 1 below.

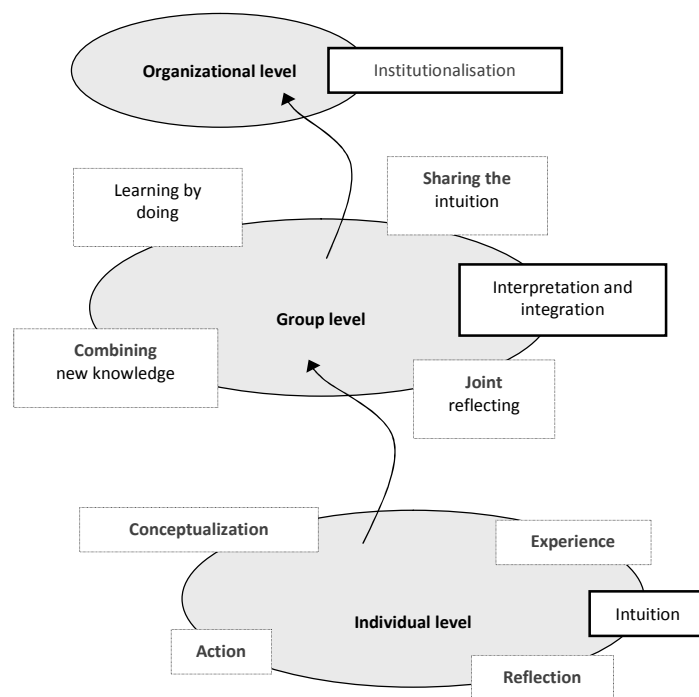


Figure 1. Transferring of learning from an individual level to an organizational level. (Adapted from Kira 2005).

Kira’s thoughts on organizational learning directly corresponds to Henry and Mark’s (2003) “Three Levels of Evaluation Influence”. The first (individual) level refers to cases when evaluation processes or findings directly cause some *change in the thoughts or actions of one or more individuals*. The second (interpersonal) level refers to a *change brought about in interactions between individuals*. The third (collective) level refers to the *direct or indirect influence of evaluation on the decisions and practices of organizations, whether public or private*. Henry and Mark’s framework is outlined in Figure 2 below.

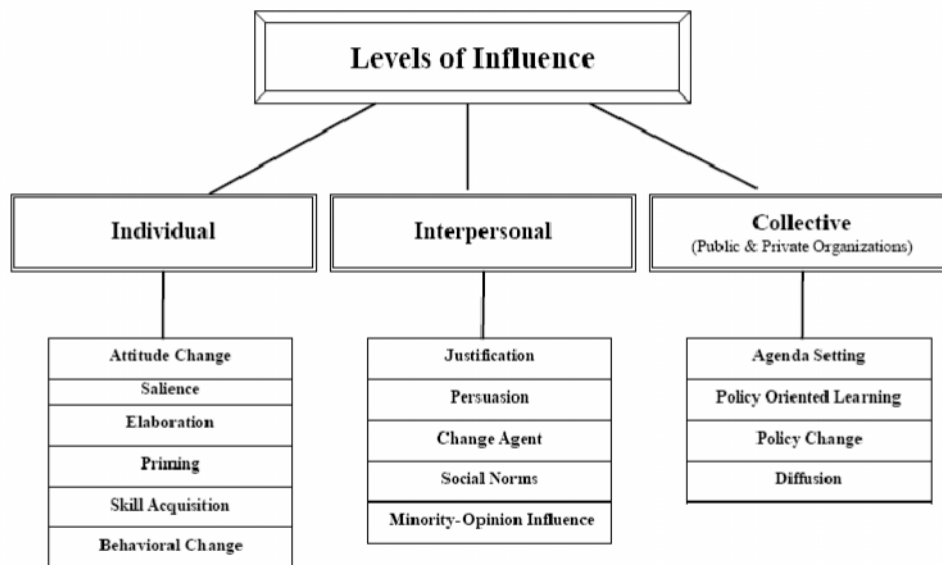


Figure 2. Transferring of learning from an individual level to an organizational level (Henry and Mark 2003, p 298).

Organizational learning and adaptation mainly occurs through the interaction of the individuals within them, benefiting from increased individual understanding which translates into change in organizational behavior (Argyris and Schon 1974; Senge 1990). Thus, organizational learning in terms of a dynamic process based on individual intuitions to group-level interpretation and ultimately organizational integration and institutionalization can generate small and big organizational changes. In this perspective, evaluation can play a central part providing input of reflexive knowledge.

In conclusion, various organizational change theories agree that organizations are complex but flexible entities that, through various transitional phases, can develop competencies to move from a current structure into a more desired. Such learning processes could readily be mediated by feedback from the external environment, such as an evaluation process.

Evaluation and New Media

Evaluation use or influence could be regarded as different forms of interaction between the evaluation process and targeted recipients. This interaction is often referred to as dissemination, and not seldom by means of a written report. Findings need to be disseminated to potential users in formats that facilitate use of the information:

The research on use makes the assumption that people to be influenced will interact in some way with the evaluation. This interaction could occur either by engaging in the evaluation process or accessing the evaluation results. Providing access to results is the role of dissemination. If an evaluation is to have influence, either directly or indirectly, through interactions with others who have been influenced by the evaluation, the evaluation information must be disseminated. When an evaluation produces a report that stays unread on a shelf, it will not be influential. Effective dissemination is a critical component of the path to achieving evaluation influence (Lawrenz et al 2007, p 276).

One might justly question the traditional written report when it comes to facilitation influence and ultimately organizational learning. Thornton et al (2007) contends, *“The relationship of systems thinking, program evaluation, and organizational learning triangulate in that an organization undergoing deep learning and paradigm shifts integrate each of these approaches, leading to reflection and learning resulting in beneficial transformation. Program evaluation provides organization leaders with data on implementation levels, goal achievement, and program effectiveness. Although the data may not be sufficient for sweeping improvements, carefully planned formative evaluations often provide structured feedback to improve systems”*. The question is in what shape this feedback should be delivered and however this form of dissemination truly promotes learning? Program evaluations can promote learning through dissemination of information, because organizational learning relates to acquisition, development, and utilization of information. In this perspective, program evaluation can become a support function for systems improvement.

However, according to Henry and Mark (2003), existing conceptualizations of use include significant gaps and shortcomings. One key gap is that the literature on use has generally failed to give adequate attention to the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and societal change processes through which evaluation findings and process may translate into steps toward social betterment. One such gap appears to be situated in the sphere of New Media:

Most attention to dissemination in journals simply describes dissemination, with minimal attention paid to how different dissemination approaches work in practice or even what approaches were used. For example, a text-based search on the general term dissemination produced several thousand articles but was not helpful because the term generally showed up as “and the results were disseminated.” A subsequent search for dissemination in titles produced only three articles. In addition, a search for using the terms communication, reporting, and evaluation yielded similar results to the dissemination search. None of the studies compared different communication techniques; instead, they focused specifically on how to write or communicate results using one method. As those search strategies indicate, although dissemination of evaluation results is common, articles focusing on dissemination itself are uncommon (Lawrenz et al 2007, p 227).

Instead, if the evaluator truly intends for the report to be used, report dissemination should be tailored for each audience in terms of scope, sequence, timing, and presentation format. The purpose of this brief outline is to highlight the vast opportunities concerning the facilitation of organizational learning processes that lie in the application of the various modalities available in what has been labeled New Media.

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