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Evaluation of an Academic Unit for Quality Assurance: Also Looking into Culture

Abstract

Academic reviews take on new directions in an ever-increasing fast-paced development. Unit reviewers should be provided different samples, with varied cultural contents also providing nuances, as related to the 'object' of the evaluation, as well as a final overall product, i.e. more of a synthesis, through which one will check the degree of compliance, as regards the previously established conditions, and the degree of sensitivity towards the variety of cultures inherent in the system. The aim of this paper is to shed light on evolving processes attempting to keep up with new contexts. The methodological approach used is qualitative. It consists of the analysis of observational notes from the researcher as a participant observer involved in the process of two evaluation exercises in higher education. We will present our findings using Weiss' (1980) models for implementation of results in education and discuss underlying strategies. Conclusions drawn can be adapted to most educational settings and should enable cultural aspects that infiltrate the process to be considered as a value-added characteristic in the establishing of a fairer evaluation framework.

Keywords: higher education, evaluation, fairness, cultural variability

Introduction

Evaluation has always favored a certain type of individual and system. For others, the results could be influenced by a pre-emptive attitude, as before evaluation time all the senses are awakened, and all systems are adjusted to be more efficient during the evaluation phase. This sometimes only happens temporarily just before the system comes under scrutiny. However, this way of proceeding is contrary to the spirit of evaluation. The purpose of monitoring and evaluation is to improve individual outcomes, accept responsibilities and adjust vision to aim for the best possible progression.

Considering the importance of outcomes, it is crucial, to also have in mind what happens following the data gathering activity. Weiss (1980) described seven models whereby the process of implementing research results is carried out in education.

1. The classic model consists of a follow-up: research, development followed by sharing, dissemination and then application.
2. The problem-solving model presupposes that the researcher presents the evidence or conclusions necessary to resolve a problem caused by a settlement or the implementation of a regulation. This model is based on sequence, identification of the required knowledge, search for appropriate knowledge or have it searched by someone, and finally make a decision.
3. The interactive model is seen as a complex and disorderly interaction between researchers and decision-makers.

4. The political model presupposes the selective use of search results to support or justify a position already taken or to organize a search with the expectation that the results will provide confirmations to justify the policy adopted.
5. The tactical model aims to sweep under the carpet a research problem or to avoid the search for a problem to cover the postponement or opposition to an action.
6. The model, called participant research to the company's intellectual enterprise, does not foresee a direct influence of research but seeks the impact of the large number of factors that influence various policy factors in various ways at different times.
7. The most common model is to inform the decision-making process through an influence on thinking and conceptualization in relation to the questions asked.

The latter is the model Weiss advocates.

We believe, for our part, that a completely explicit path must be followed, and it also seems necessary to define the appropriate terms so that we can qualify the procedures, so they are well-understood by all parties involved.

Beveridge (1996) agrees that there is a tendency to simplify and distort to accommodate for simplistic ideas about learning and understanding that the education system tends to accept (p. 34).

Methodology

Qualitative research is best suited for these two studies in order to find out details and uncover intricacies (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2014) when looking for specifics and making comparisons. The main approach used was an analysis of observational notes during evaluation processes at two universities. We are also looking at case study as two different situations have been examined in two different locations. There is also comparison involved as we are outlining similarities and differences in the way the processes unfolded.

The first study took place before a business model was used for universities. As regards the site, we are talking about the internal evaluation of a university institute in eastern Canada. The evaluation had to do with a particular academic unit. The process lasted three months. Observations were recorded in a journal. Analysis of journal texts allowed to uncover emerging themes. These were later discussed in light of the approach to the evaluation processes.

The approach to that evaluation exercise was as follows. The team of reviewers consisted of four individuals, including an external reviewer, a highly recognized peer in the field of specialty and from the same cultural background as the members of the institute. The other three evaluators were on site, one from a similar institute within the same university and a culture similar to that of the institute, another of the same type of institute at a nearby university and sharing the culture, and the third evaluator shared the culture but came from a totally different institute from the same university.

The team members who were on site were tasked with doing a sort of clearing ahead of time, consisting of a data collection and summarizing the items to be reviewed, from which the external examiner could prepare his two-day investigation in the field upon arrival.

All members of the institute were summoned to a first meeting during which the process was explained in detail and all questions were answered. The secretary of the institute also set up schedules to allow each member to have an interview with the evaluators. The secretary was also to advise all students at the institute to contact the evaluators either for an interview or by sending their comments. After his visit, the external reviewer was still allowed to consult the onsite committee through phone calls or mail. The committee was also required to submit a full report of the process and the issues uncovered as well as recommendations to be made to assist the external evaluator in drafting his report. Only the report and recommendations of the external evaluator were intended for the university administration and the institute.

The second study was carried out at a university in central Canada of the same type as the first one but more recently, particularly when the business model had been adopted in academic settings which occurred approximately five years ago. The evaluation process observed in this unit did not necessarily reflect what is happening elsewhere at the same university and the subjects studied at that unit have nothing to do with the business world. Observations were recorded in a journal during the evaluation, in the same way as in the first study. These were subsequently analyzed, and findings discussed in light of the process for the specific site and later comparisons were made between the two processes and the two sites.

Three knowledgeable evaluators were chosen also perhaps with the hope that they would be lenient. The cultural issue however was viewed from a totally different perspective. Playmakers recommended their friends as examiners. These reviewers therefore shared the culture of these particular members of the institution but were probably not particularly representative of the local population. They also chose people who shared the same philosophy, no longer looking for neutral persons.

Only management representatives could meet with the reviewers to present all the successes of the unit. Members of the institution could not speak to evaluators individually, only in small groups organized ahead of time, as if one 'in-person' were in charge of controlling the discussions. The administration asked to see the names of the people who went to these meetings ahead of time, the reason for this strategy was unclear. One wonders if someone was infiltrated into the group meetings with the reviewers with the mandate to report each person who had a complaint to the unit administration.

A whole productivity file for each member of a group wishing to meet with the evaluators had to be submitted to the evaluation committee and prepared beforehand: so perhaps the idea was to contextualize the positions of the group member who decided to speak-up. All unit members also had to submit their productivity records but did not know what the administration was doing with them. I requested to have a look at the overall file while meeting with the evaluators in a small group meeting and discovered that half of the pages listing my publications had been placed after the name of the colleague next to me in alphabetical order and who hardly had any publications associated to his name. Headquarters controlled this file.

We had to prepare at least one year in advance of the evaluation. The report of the last evaluation was taken up just at that time, with just a year of implementation

of the last directions given four years earlier, and it appeared that directions suggested during the previous review had received little attention up to that date. New processes seemed to have just been implemented as in crisis management. In other words, a quick change was made, even in a temporary way to meet the requests from previous evaluators. We had to double our effort, mask and embellish at every step, in order to influence the result in a positive way. The survival of a unit is the concern of every employee.

Discussion

The two studies although conducted in different situational contexts showed that a great amount of effort was displayed to carry out the evaluation exercises. Despite sufficient amounts of care taken, one can wonder how much the results weighed on future outcomes. In addition, in light of the vast amounts of data, it would be important to know who proceeded with quality control in the organization of files. This question concerns the issue of publications data shifted from one colleague to another as mentioned above. As a result of the academic review no one ever sent detailed comments to unit members, just a one-page summary in each case was offered for viewing.

It is unclear if any negative outcome would have made it to the person concerned. There had not been any big issue as a follow-up of the unit evaluations in our studies. However, it should be noted that at one point, the second unit received a conditional pass only, with a request to submit corrective measures implemented that were recommended within a given timeline. Beveridge (1997), and Beveridge and Rimmershaw (1991) caution about the complexities involved in analyzing any kind of data and unit evaluations that require to put of vast amount of information under scrutiny.

Common trends

The process in the first study shows a certain openness and consideration for cultural diversity. The evaluators were well chosen culturally. They all had knowledge of, and an openness to, the culture of the institute. As a result, all members of the institute openly contributed, leaving out no details about a problem they had at heart. The sharing of the same culture had therefore served to build confidence and allow for further evaluation. The committee consisted of two women and two men. The young women in the institute who had difficulties to report contacted the two women of the evaluation committee.

One of the problems identified was the gender imbalance at this institute in the first study. Another cultural problem that emerged was the differences in conduct expected by two different generations. There did not seem however to have been any bad intentions in either group, rather a lack of communication.

It was also discovered that the administration took advantage of the cultural differences between members of the institute who were not from the local culture to pay them a lower salary.

However, at the same time there was no complaint about their long absences during the summer, thinking that they probably had to return to their country of origin to teach a summer session and be better able to provide for themselves. In a

sense, this evaluative approach can be considered more humane and humanistic than other known models because nothing had been swept under the carpet. However, it is mindful of the fact that the only report that is officially recognized is that of the external reviewer, who was free to leave out some of the recommendations and comments of the local committee.

All in all, the final report was fair, carried a lot of weight and also respected different sensitivities.

Placing evaluative responsibility on the external reviewer for the final report also helped establish a distance between the members of the institute and the local examiners, which allowed to maintain good neighborly relations between academics sharing the same spaces on campus. These results point to a successful process along the lines of Weiss' (1980) seventh model.

The second study results came about following observations made during an evaluation of a university unit in central Canada, when the business model was adopted in academic settings. The choice of evaluators appeared to be judicious especially given that more complexity was involved in the business approach to the evaluation. The second evaluation was more in line with Weiss' (1980) second model. It also appeared close to a crisis management model. The outcomes of the new evaluation were in a sense predetermined by the selection of the evaluation committee members. The reviewers made suggestions about new paths proposed, of course, but in a superficial and unsustainable way to enable the institute to shine despite shortcomings. It was doubtful that this would lead to improvement and the same approach to crisis management would probably follow again. Recommendations were made, but not directly implemented, probably not until just before the next assessment would be scheduled, to show that there has been progress made. This approach cannot lead to profound change. There is a lot of food for thought stemming from these studies. As student population bases shift drastically and at a very fast pace, there undoubtedly needs to be a more concerted effort in taking into account the diversity of situations also involving variety and variation across a number of spectrums.

Principles underlying the evaluation process

One would assume that any evaluation basically would have to do with balance. Ways must be found to align all elements of the evaluation with the individuals that need to be evaluated. In other words, it is a matter of using the most appropriate method in line with contextual information.

The evaluation exercise must be valid, reliable and fair. It is necessary to see what is being done and to what degree of satisfaction if not perfection. This cannot be carried out without a calibration system. It is clear that clear expectations and explicit criteria for the objectives had to be established beforehand.

As mentioned above various methods and diversified strategies must come into play along evaluation activity divisions into two areas: it is essential to include representative samples of the performance of the individuals involved as well as copies of behaviors examined on the job.

A conclusion can only be drawn by taking into account the training streams and specific instructions given that are at the source of the behaviors. It has to do with culture.

The evaluative approach adopted must aim to lead to success, to bring about improvement. To that end, assessors and evaluators should make decisions about what will be placed under scrutiny together and how, that is, by what criteria, the 'objects' of the evaluation will be assessed.

This makes a lot of sense and it is understandable that units no longer accept to be evaluated without preparation after sufficient notice is given.

A lot of thought and preparation should go into the process. An awareness for evaluators of their own culture is required.

In the assessment act, the evaluator's culture is very often imposed on the 'object' of the evaluation. In addition, personal ways of using a language also condition this act.

De Gramont (1990) predicts distortions caused by language but which are mainly due to lack of cultural knowledge. He tries to identify the problem by drawing up a list of metaphors of the self. It includes a hereditary and biological component, and other components, including contextual, conventional and poetic. These should allow the individual to be well positioned in relation to the assessment to be undertaken.

The hereditary component relates to our physical aspects and the mental traits that characterize us. Our biology dictates our behavior to some extent. The contextual component refers to the influences of our environment on our individuality. This can influence our habits, our working conditions, our responses to certain stimuli. Everything about culture, the customs that explain the cultural mold that formed us, is found in the conventional component. In the multicultural context in which we assess, it is necessary to question the various cultural influences surrounding it. Our creativity is placed within the framework of the poetic component. The perspective from which a person approaches the issues can also be explained by the greater or lesser degree of creativity they possess.

There should be an openness to the multiplicity of possible cultural clues. In addition, higher psychological processes have to be taken into account (Vygotsky, 1978) when placing institutes of higher education under scrutiny. According to Borden (1991), there are a whole range of aspects that influence our assessment of situations. The questions he asks relate to eye movement, the importance attached to time, positioning, colors, noise and silence, and gestures.

We need to be aware of such factors because without taking into account the traits inherent in cultural habits could lead to distorted interpretations.

Conclusion

Knowing how to operate fairly in a unit evaluation is crucial.

Following the consideration of evaluators' characteristics of their own cultural coloring, in addition to the awareness of other factors that various cultural filters have missed, it is also necessary to take stock of the diversity of skills. Assessing properly will depend on a given context and on the way the assessment will have to change depending on the situation. What could a reasonable operating framework look like? For a successful evaluation, it is a matter of working on two aspects. First, we must gather facts: we take into account the accumulation of information, documents from various sources, whether it be summaries of written activities, oral presentations made at meetings, reports of individual productivity or review of

finished products, but always in the light of established expectations and not a virtual and perfectionist goal. On the contrary, we must take into account the current aspect of things, see what can be improved in relation to pre-established expectations and choose exemplary ways to demonstrate opportunities for improvement.

It is essential to draw up the list of 'objects' to be put under scrutiny at the beginning because afterwards, once the process has begun, there will no longer be the necessary distance for judgment to remain neutral.

The tricky part is to choose the items to be evaluated in a culminating way to be able to demonstrate that the system holds together soundly. It will be important that the small samples selected at the outset reflect the overall aim and add to the value of documents that will come under the microscope at an advanced stage, with all of it coming together at the time of the synthesis of all the data accumulated.

On the other hand, it is also necessary to review the 'collected objects' and judge them on their value, establish their quality and decide on the value to be attributed to them. As final remarks, it should be said that since culture infiltrates any evaluation process, an accurate picture can only be made if one is prepared to take into account the knowledge, know-how and knowing how to be, associated with the people whose 'objects' are part of the evaluation.

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