

THE IMPORTANCE OF PERIPHERAL VISION IN EVALUATIVE PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on three recent evaluations in which the authors' goal of creating "learning communities" was frustrated. In retrospect, the failures are not attributable to a lack of diligence in attending to the details of program dynamics or the mechanics of the evaluation. Rather, diligence in these matters comes with substantial costs, infecting our evaluation practice with a kind of tunnel vision. In "keeping our eye on the ball," we pay insufficient attention to contextual influences that are not immediately obvious or to theoretical perspectives that might better inform our learning objectives. In watching carefully to see what project leaders actually do, regardless of what they set out to do, we unwittingly exacerbate a climate of anxiety and defensiveness that undermines the spirit of open inquiry we hope to foster. The analysis suggests the importance of peripheral vision to the craft of evaluation, and identifies obstacles along this path.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PERIPHERAL VISION IN EVALUATIVE PRACTICE

Evaluators take pride in seeing things as they really are and providing truthful feedback. Ideally, this feedback facilitates reflective learning and more enlightened choices about future directions. As evaluators who are also adult educators and community developers, we have a special interest in conducting evaluations in a manner that creates “learning communities” (North Central Regional Center for Rural Development, 1997; Mezirow, 2000) and “reflective practitioners” (Forester, 1999). The mark of these communities is the presence of citizen leaders who can test reality, suspend judgment, deliberate on experience, seek out relevant information, and develop strategies that are sensitive to the community context. Yet our experiences in conducting reflective evaluations in a variety of community settings have fallen far short of this ambition.

Our failures are not primarily due to our lack of diligence in attending to the details of program dynamics or the mechanics of the evaluation. On the contrary, the problem is that diligence in these matters comes with substantial costs, infecting our evaluation practice with a kind of tunnel vision. In fixating on what is immediately in front of us, we pay insufficient attention to contextual influences that are not obvious or to theoretical perspectives that might better inform our learning objectives. In watching carefully to see what project leaders actually do, regardless of what they set out to do, we unwittingly exacerbate a climate of anxiety and defensiveness that undermines the spirit of open inquiry we hope to foster.

What we have learned from our failures is that *peripheral vision* is as important to the craft of evaluation as it is to the grace of an athlete or the imagination of the artist. To illustrate what we

mean, this paper draws on our experiences in conducting three recent evaluations. The evaluated projects vary considerably in their settings (rural/urban), scope (dollars and duration), focus (civic engagement, healthy communities, welfare reform school attendance), and contractual sponsor (a state agency; community based organization; private foundations). In this article we focus on what is consistent across the three cases: our oft-frustrated intention to relate to project stakeholders in a way that facilitated continuous learning and improvement.

VISION AND THE DELIBERATIVE SPIRIT

Foveal vision—the part of our sight nearest the point where our eyes are focused—is known for its acuteness, without which we cannot see vivid color or distinguishing details. But attending solely or single-mindedly to the images at the center of our vision is a recipe for trouble, as anyone driving on a crowded freeway can attest. The value of peripheral vision is in bringing to awareness objects that are worthy of our attention even if not sharply defined. Without peripheral vision we have no way to frame the objects of immediate focus in a bigger picture that helps give them meaning.

Arguing for an ecological world view, philosopher Mary Catherine Bateson (1994, p. 134) notes,

Our habits of attention work against seeing, and the connections in the system are invisible—Focusing on the pursuit of particular, narrow goals, we pay attention to a fraction of the whole, block out peripheral vision, and act without looking at the larger picture.

From a very different starting point, hypnotherapist Andy Smith (2001, p. 1) notes the psychic and physical costs associated with over-reliance on foveal vision:

Very often in modern life we see things with a kind of mild tunnel vision, where we are very focused on one thing and ignore everything else around. Think of when you watch TV and you don't really notice the rest of the room—This kind of tunnel vision or 'foveal' vision also seems to go with an inner tunnel vision, where we get obsessed or fixated on something and

lose context. So it goes with worry, obsession, fixation and also seems correlated with rushing around, and with arousal of the sympathetic nervous system, producing adrenaline and other stress chemicals.

Smith promotes a stress reduction technique that works by getting patients to attend to their peripheral vision. Reflecting on our experience as evaluators, we began to wonder if something similar might be useful. All too frequently, it seemed, we found ourselves caught up in anxious worrying and frantic running around that is at odds with the spirit of deliberative inquiry, and that tends to lose a sense of context and perspective. As Daniel Kemmis (1995) has remarked: “I have come to the conclusion that there is a certain way of being frantic that we have adopted that serves us very ill, and there is a certain way of being with what’s going on that would serve us better.”

ORGANIZATIONAL SETTING AND APPROACH

For five years the authors—a political scientist and an evaluation specialist—have teamed to evaluate collaborative community development initiatives sponsored by public, nonprofit and private organizations. We work for Cooperative Extension at a major land grant university, an organization rooted in a desire to develop and deepen the practice of democratic citizenship through various methods of adult learning (Peters, 1996). At the time these evaluations were undertaken, XXX was nearing retirement after many years as an adult educator and evaluation specialist, while XXX was in the early stages of his career, working as Director of the newly formed [program] at XXX.

[The program's] creation was sparked by three recent trends in American political life that have heightened interest in the processes of community self-governance. The first is *policy devolution*—the idea that government programs are more effective and more engaging of citizen energy and allegiance if they are designed and managed at the local level. The second is the move to *reinvent government*—the attempt to turn isolated bureaucratic programs into results-oriented integrated service partnerships between government, business, nonprofit organizations, and other elements of local civil society. The third is a growing *regional awareness*—the realization that local governments must learn to plan and act cooperatively if they are to thrive in the new global economy and care for what is unique in their heritage and place.

A wave of innovation and experimentation in community settings has accompanied these trends. Government or foundation funding is driving much of the new experimentation, and funded projects frequently are required to develop evaluations as part of their activity. As a university-based program

with interests in collaborative community processes and expertise in evaluation, our evaluation services have been solicited by a number of project leaders.

Even if we had wanted to do so, it would have been very difficult to impose a single mold on the three evaluations described in this article. Nevertheless, we brought to each evaluation a few general ideas about what we wanted to achieve that were independent of the expectations of the funders or project participants.

The goal of creating learning communities integrates a range of purposes and activities drawn from various schools of evaluation thought and practice. With Patton (1997), we believe that the ultimate test of evaluation is its validity and usefulness to project leaders, and its ability to build their capacity to undertake new initiatives. At the same time, we try to be “truth tellers,” collecting and presenting information on assumptions and performance (operations, management, accomplishment, costs, ethics), even when those findings are not what stakeholders want to hear (Scriven, 1993 ; Stake, 2000).

Much of our work with local actors involves helping them develop a broader perspective on the meaning of their work, and an ability to see it in light of the bigger picture of political and social trends. We are especially concerned with encouraging stakeholders to view their activities from a community development perspective, as opposed to the more narrow legal or managerial mindsets that often predominate in bureaucratic organizations. For example, we stress the talents and intelligence of ordinary people, rather than exclusive reliance on experts; mixed strategies rather than single approaches; and long time horizons rather than a fixation on the immediate bottom-line.

Our hope is that reflective evaluation will create public space in which these qualities are present, with resulting increases in the community's ability to draw on diverse individuals to accomplish public work (Boyte, 1996)—solving common problems or realizing joint aspirations.

We share with the action research paradigm (Argyris, 1992, p. 432) the inclination to take our cues about the important questions, puzzles and problems from the perceptions of practitioners within the local practice context. We are less inclined, however, to promote specific system changes through our own interventions. Similarly, we share with the participatory action research paradigm a desire for equipping local players—particularly the “lesser heard voices”—with new critical skills and capacities, and a greater sense of voice. At the same time, both our contractual obligations and our sense of professionalism have led us to retain primary control over the design and implementation of the evaluations. We try our best to minimize jargon and other unnecessary professional trappings, modeling open inquiry about difficult issues and treating all participants, regardless of status or standing in the community, with equal dignity and respect.

THREE CASES ILLUSTRATING FRUSTRATED EVALUATIVE INTENTIONS

In this section we describe our practices in three evaluations, focusing on 1) the nature of the project or program evaluated, 2) our understanding of the potential learning community, in contrast to how this was perceived by project leaders, 3) the types of learning-oriented activities we included in our evaluation work, and 4) our sense of success and failure in advancing our learning and community development objectives during the course of the evaluation.

The Merced County Attendance Project (MerCAP) (1997-2000)

In the summer of 1997 we contracted with the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) to evaluate the Merced County Attendance Project (MerCAP). A joint project of the Merced County Human Services Agency (HSA) and Merced County Schools, MerCAP sought to improve the attendance of students receiving welfare case assistance (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, TANF). The setting for the project was an agriculturally dependent Central Valley county known for high rates of poverty. The program used attendance monitoring, communication with parents, corrective action plans, and a financial sanction to encourage attendance in children ages 6-15. The theory was that early intervention would reduce absenteeism that contributes to lack of school success, poor preparation for work, and future welfare dependency.

Under MerCAP, failure of TANF children to attend school full-time results in a fiscal sanction that reduces the family's cash assistance by the amount for that child for a minimum of one month.

Because the project required a waiver from the confidentiality requirements of California's Welfare

and Institutions code, Merced officials had to seek and obtain CDSS approval for the project. The evaluation was a required element of the project; it sought to examine the impacts of the project on student attendance and achievement, and the process and costs of implementation. Of the three evaluations reported here, MerCAP was the most formal, time-consuming, and heavily funded (\$300,000), and the only one that required extensive analysis of quantitative data.

In most respects, this was a standard summative program evaluation. Nevertheless, we sought to do our work in a way that contributed to ongoing project decision-making, assumption testing, and reflection. At the time we were hired, CDSS was at the beginning of a wave of new demonstration projects brought on by welfare reform. In our negotiations with them, we made clear our bias toward bringing a community development perspective to the evaluation. CDSS was open to this, although their primary concern was in making sure that valid impact and process studies were conducted so that the results of the program could be accurately ascertained. The evaluation specifications included a range of very specific questions CDSS wanted answered, and we used these as the basis for our evaluation design. The Merced County Human Services Agency, which would assume prime responsibility for program design and development, and the Merced County Schools, on which the burdens of implementation would fall, were not part of the evaluation negotiations. Likewise, we were not included in program design discussions until after the demonstration was underway.

From our perspective, the potential learning community in MerCAP included the research and program demonstration staff of CDSS; the directors and staff of the Merced Human Services Agency; school district superintendents, principals, and attendance clerks; TANF parents and their children; and other community leaders and community-based organizations. It also included state

policy leaders, particularly those concerned with tracking new policy developments under welfare reform. We considered all of these to have not only a potential interest in the evaluation findings, but some role in the ongoing development and adaptation of the demonstration as time went on and results became known. In describing our work we said “It is undertaken to aid participants and policy leaders to reflect retrospectively on the assumptions underlying the program, the congruence between intentions and reality, and program consequences—both anticipated and unanticipated.”

Project leaders, however, had a narrower understanding of the nature of the evaluation and its potential audience. They were primarily interested in our quantitative data gathering and analysis skills so that changes in attendance patterns could be documented, and secondarily in process observations that might inform the program development decisions of a small number of welfare department and school officials assigned to the program advisory committee. The audience included anyone who had a “need to know” as they defined it at the time. Teachers, parents and other community organizations were not viewed as relevant stakeholders, much less as partners in program design. Most importantly, local welfare officials hoped that the MerCAP evaluation would document their innovative program as successful, helping their reputations both locally and among other county welfare departments in the state.

Motivated by our desire to create a learning community, we went beyond the prescribed confines of the evaluation in a number of specific ways over the course of the evaluation. Our contract required quarterly progress reports to CDSS officials in Sacramento to share 1) preliminary results, and 2) any problems encountered. While meeting this requirement, we chose also to use the reports for educational and developmental purposes. For starters, we included on the report distribution list

HSA and school staff in Merced County who were members of the MerCAP program advisory committee, as well as both the welfare department director and the county superintendent of schools, giving them a chance to review and comment on these report drafts. We included in the reports issues that front-line implementers (e.g. school attendance clerks) had raised that needed the attention of program leaders. We also added suggestions and recommendations of our own, some of a practical nature (e.g. the need for a handbook, or an advisory committee), and others that had more to do with program philosophy. For example, on numerous occasions we suggested to project staff ways they could fruitfully involve parents or community-based organizations in project development.

We played educational roles in other ways as well, setting up sessions to share attendance data with individual schools or school districts. We sought both to get their aid in interpreting the quantitative findings, and to give them an opportunity to share information and best practices with each other. Typically these meetings elicited questions about evolving MerCAP policies and procedures, since many required a good deal of discretion or interpretation, and personnel were always changing. By cataloguing school questions and sharing them with the advisory committee we played a role in setting the agenda for program planning.

In assessing our work from a learning and community development perspective, we can point to some successes. Project leaders incorporated some of our basic suggestions (handbook, advisory committee, how lists were updated, some schools moving to uniform policies, etc.), ideas that they probably would have eventually come to on their own. On the other hand, when we shared findings that demonstrated that the program was failing to make much improvement in TANF attendance

rates, or highlighting mistaken assumptions (e.g. the fundamental assumption that attendance of welfare students was lower than that of non-welfare students), we saw little evidence that these informed future decisions. These findings drew attention only when they were in written reports that project leaders viewed as a potential source of embarrassment.

Our greatest frustration was our perception that we made little dent in the basic legalistic paradigm with which welfare and school officials often operate. Despite repeated efforts and concrete suggestions over three years, they never really experimented with approaches that a community development frame of reference would suggest. For example, they did not follow up on our advice to hold a community forum to elicit the support of citizens and community based organizations for MerCAP goals. Program developers acknowledged the limitations of their approaches, but seemed content to adapt MerCAP to existing routines rather than use it to experiment with new directions. This seemed particularly shortsighted to us in the context of welfare reform's emphasis on inter-agency and community partnerships.

The Lassen County Healthy Community Project (1997-1999)

In the fall of 1997, the Community Planning and Advisory Council (ComPAC) of Lassen County contracted with us to evaluate their project to develop a "healthy community." Lassen County is a remote, rural region in northeastern California, with one of the smallest county populations in the state. At the time of the evaluation, about one-third of the population was employed or incarcerated in two large state prisons.

The project, funded by the California Endowment, involved initiating a set of healthy community initiatives to promote strong families, quality education, holistic health, a sense of community, civic infrastructure, environmental protection, and economic opportunities. This sweeping agenda stands in stark contrast to the modest aspirations of the civic leaders who initially sought the grant out of a desire to create a central meeting place that cut down on the number of separate planning meetings they were asked to attend. With the Endowment grant, however, came higher expectations and broader goals, and substantially more money than requested. We eventually concluded that receiving too much money too soon in its development was actually detrimental to ComPAC.

The California Endowment required the evaluation, but left it up to ComPAC to hire the evaluator and specify its design and purpose. In negotiating the evaluation design, we focused on two types of questions. One type dealt with ComPAC's organization development, including whether it succeeded in establishing 501c(3) status, developed an effective organizational structure and strategic plan, managed its finances effectively, and became a visible catalyst for community action. Beyond this, we focused on the goals ComPAC had articulated in its grant, and tried to help them establish ways they could collect evidence of results. Given the limited resources available to the evaluation (\$43,000), our strategy was to facilitate ComPAC's own evidence collection, rather than to mount a large independent effort of our own.

The evaluation workplan submitted to ComPAC summed up our approach as follows:

In consulting with ComPAC leaders, we understood that the purpose of the evaluation was to engage participants in a process of continuous learning related to project

activities and goals. The evaluation was intended to help ComPAC focus its goals, reflect on the actions taken to reach goals, assess progress, chart direction, and retain the flexibility to change as needed to meet challenges effectively. The key test of this type of evaluation is its validity and usefulness to the project leaders, building their capacity for undertaking new initiatives.

In the ComPAC evaluation, almost all of our basic activities fit within the learning and development-oriented approach to evaluation. They included:

- Negotiating up front our roles/their roles, codifying these in the workplan, and reiterating them during site visits;
- Conducting reflective, open-ended interviews at the beginning, middle and end of our work, and using these not only to collect data but also to provide reflective space for program stakeholders to ponder future directions;
- Training staff, board, and community participants on basic techniques of results-based accountability;
- Articulating in written and oral presentations the broader importance of what they were trying to do;
- Framing the strengths and weaknesses of three future options/opportunities/challenges for the organization after interviews revealed substantial differences in how stakeholders viewed the organization's mission;
- Reminding them of the need to focus their energies by choosing among these options, and holding a workshop for this purpose;
- Bringing conflicts and challenges to the surface, while respecting individuals;

- Feeding back to them reports from our stakeholder interviews, billed as mirroring perceptions rather than establishing facts;
- Reporting on their activities and achievements, particularly related to the Endowment's requirements;
- Providing periodic feedback through four written interim reports and oral reports to board and staff.

The learning community we envisioned included ComPAC's board, its executive director and other staff, community participants in ComPAC's work, existing community based organizations, and local leaders. As a brand new organization (the Endowment grant "created" ComPAC), we understood that much of our work would be with the staff and board itself, helping them focus their goals and chart future courses of action. ComPAC staff, board, and participants were open to the idea of proceeding in this fashion, but were not familiar with the idea of using evaluation for formative rather than summative purposes, and struggled to capitalize on the learning opportunities we were attempting to create. For example, the evaluation training we provided seemed to be taken in, but never met the basic test of helping ComPAC specify results in a way that focused their program activities. Likewise, the energy we put into framing organizational options was never really picked up on by staff, except when we forced the issue. Even then, we had little sense that the option picked actually altered the course of ComPAC.

The Prop 10 Civic Engagement Project for Children and Families (1999-2002)

From October 1999 through June 2002, the authors were lead evaluators for the Civic Engagement Project for Children and Families (CEP), a collaborative initiative between foundations, civic organizations, and the University of California. In November 1998 California voters had approved Proposition 10, which placed a new 50 cents per pack tax on cigarettes. The funds generated by the tax are designated for programs and services that benefit children ages 0-5, including the areas of childcare, health, and parent education. Tax funds are distributed proportionally to each of the state's 58 counties based on their birth rate, and local Children and Families Commissions make decisions on how best to use the funding.

For counties, Prop 10 provided a rare opportunity to receive relatively large amounts of discretionary funding that can be used to support locally designed programs. For a group of private foundations interested in developing a project to link ordinary citizens with elite decision makers in developing public policy, it provided a setting in which to test the potential and limits of the concepts of public dialogue. CEP sought to enhance the involvement of the public in the work of eight local commissions, particularly lesser-heard voices.

With \$177,000 provided by the sponsoring foundations, the evaluation 1) provided in each county a context-sensitive description of the Prop 10 CEP activities and their observable impacts, and 2) summarized the lessons learned during the project that might apply across counties or in other settings. In meetings these objectives, we wished to stimulate the reflection of funders, CEP staff, and their partners in the eight counties. The latter include local Prop 10 commissioners, executive

directors and other staff, particularly civic engagement staff hired with the help of CEP funds. From our perspective, all these players plus other local community organizations and leaders and national leaders in the civic engagement/public deliberation movements are part of the learning community for this evaluation.

The funders themselves embraced the idea of “inquiry” as a basic mode of operation within CEP. In this respect, our aims as evaluators were more in tune with the aims of our evaluation sponsors in this project than in the other two. On the other hand, the Prop 10 work in the counties was both highly visible and politically charged, creating an environment in which the value of open-ended inquiry was challenged by the needs for individuals and organizations to protect their interests and advance their reputations.

During this evaluation, we became very involved with the CEP project staff, providing frequent feedback on their proposed directions, and forwarding raw or synthesized data from our interviews and observations as soon as they were available. We also endeavored to provide more feedback to the county commission staff as well, for example by providing them with summaries of interviews we held with commissioners in their county, or with our reports on our interviews with public meeting participants. We hoped this would encourage them to reflect on how different stakeholders are thinking about the meaning of civic engagement, and the criteria for understanding what a successful civic engagement effort would look like given the particular circumstances of their county. We also used the occasion of our Year 1 report to frame four key challenges we felt the project faced in the coming year, raising thorny questions rooted in the difficulties CEP encountered

in its first year. This lifting up of questions and challenges was not an explicit part of our evaluation marching orders, but fit our idea of what a reflective evaluation should try to do.

The response was mixed. CEP staff and funders expressed appreciation for our work, but also worried about the fact that local partners did not perceive the evaluation as helpful. Many of the county staff were impatient with our insistence that it was premature to identify best practices given that the work was still in a formative stage and that the criteria for success were not clearly delineated. In general, the pressing workload and pressure-packed visibility of staff work at the county level was out of sync with our efforts to promote suspended judgment and critical reflection. The tendency was to want to celebrate the good work of reaching out to minorities and non-English speakers, without carefully scrutinizing the meaning or value of the resulting encounters.

REFLECTING ON OUR EVALUATION PRACTICE WITH PERIPHERAL VISION

Each of these evaluations presented challenges that kept us focused on the work that was immediately in front of us—the next round of interviews, difficulties tracking down data, reports to write, etc. During the period in question, the [our program’s] agenda was quite full and juggling many projects at once contributed to a rather frantic pace. At the time, we credited ourselves with having attended to details in a diligent and responsible matter. In retrospect, however, we notice important connections and perspectives that were overlooked in our fixation on getting tasks done. The following sections present three examples of ways our evaluation goals might have been better served by a kind of peripheral vision. The three illustrations by no means exhaust the possibilities.

Recognizing Organizational Barriers to Inquiry

There is a substantial literature (see Argyris, 1992) arguing that the spirit of inquiry researchers idealize is inherently in tension with the characteristic ways in which organizations teach people to not be open, not take risks, and not trust, lest organizational or individual survival be threatened. This is one potent way of explaining why a continuous learning thrust fails, despite the best efforts of evaluators. Yet we tended to proceed as if it could be taken for granted that organizational players would be as interested in disinterested truth-telling as we were.

In our CEP evaluation, we have come face to face with the folly of this notion as we have interacted with executive directors of the local Prop 10 commissions. These directors serve at the discretion of their commissions, and have good reason to be threatened when our “mini-reports” on interviews

with commissioners convey, in descriptive terms, commissioner displeasure with certain staff directions. To expect the directors to read these in a spirit of “here’s the raw data, now what do you make of this?” is asking a lot. This does not mean that the information is not potentially useful to them, simply that in managing our relationship with them we need to be aware of when these sensitive moments are going to emerge. We were not alert or skilled enough and lost trust as a result. The executive directors need more assurance that we are not going to embarrass them, either by publishing inaccurate information, or by failing to challenge inaccuracies in the statements of those whose interview quotes we include in reports.

What would it mean to create a safer organizational container in which inquiry based reflection could take place? Can this be done in a way that does not compromise the truth-telling function of the evaluation? These are difficult questions that require sensitive adjustment to different evaluation contexts. It might be possible to experiment with creating settings in which findings can be reported and deliberated in less threatening ways, but only if the local Prop 10 commissioners themselves buy into that notion, thus reducing the pressure on the executive directors and staff. In MerCAP, the formality of the evaluation would have made creating trust more difficult, even had we focused on it as a goal. In Lassen, we had perhaps the best chance at practicing evaluation in the manner we hoped for, given the hands-off stance of the funders and our ability to negotiate a tailored evaluation plan up front. What stymied us in that case was the presence of staff for whom the project felt overwhelming, and who thus brought with them a high degree of anxiety that inhibited reflection and learning. In particular, it tended to cause them to focus in a quite literal way on meeting the goals set out in the original proposal, rather than adapting to what was learned along the way.

In a very basic way, our essential naiveté was in presuming that the people we were relating to really wanted to learn. Instead, we came to understand that what they really wanted was to adapt and survive as an organization without major changes, or to build a new organization in a way that was comfortable rather than requiring a great deal of stretching. This reality would come as no surprise to students of organizational development, but we failed to give it a proper place within our working field of vision.

Taking Stock of Managerial Leadership as Key to Learning Organizations

There is another sense in which our work on these three evaluations was not sufficiently informed by the literatures on organizational development and organizational learning (Argyris, 1992; Belasen, 2000; Senge, 1999; Starkey, 1996). In the three evaluations, two focused on brand new organizations (ComPAC, the county Prop 10 Commissions) and one on an established organization in the midst of a major paradigm shift (the Merced County welfare department). Yet as evaluators we never really came to grips with the importance of these basic realities. In the case of ComPAC and CEP, project managers were overwhelmed with start up issues (e.g. securing office space, setting up an infrastructure for distributing funds) that had little to do with the focal point of the projects we were evaluating, but everything to do with their own learning goals. We are not suggesting that we should have altered our basic evaluation questions or played the role of organizational development consultants. But we certainly could have been more intentional about finding ways to insure that our learning-related activities met participants “where they were” rather than where we wanted them to be.

For example, our ability to promote a less legalistic and more collaborative approach to implementing MerCAP would have benefited from the literature addressing the key role of managerial leaders in organizational change efforts (Belasen, 2000; Senge, 1999). Our key organizational contacts tended to be at subordinate organizational levels and they lacked the authority to innovate without the approval of higher-ranking managers. Yet we spent little of our time, especially early on, in taking stock of these organizational dynamics and strategizing about their learning implications. We needed to better understand the perspective of the director of the Human Services Agency, and his relationship to the local elected official who had originated the idea for MerCAP. We can only speculate as to whether such an approach would have cleared the way for deeper learning and change. It may have been the case, for example, that the department did not have managerial leaders at the top who were committed to going out of their way to find information that would help the organization meet new challenges. What is clear in retrospect is that without the active support of manager-leaders the front-line implementers had little inclination to stray far from engrained ways of doing business.

In MerCAP we encountered an interesting paradox early on in our work. It was clear from the early data that the program was having a minimal effect at best on improving TANF student attendance, yet local implementers all spoke quite favorably of the program, and continued to embrace the demonstration as a successful initiative. The only immediate explanation for this we could postulate was the fact that the program was having a positive effect on a few of the kids in schools with the most egregious attendance problems, kids who were very visible to school personnel even though they constituted a small part of the target population. But this didn't explain why HSA officials

continued to embrace the program given evidence that—on aggregate—it was not making much difference and was quite costly to implement.

Our understanding began to mature when we realized the role MerCAP played in the organizational identity of the Merced welfare department in the broader circles of reference for their organization, including state DSS officials and their colleagues in the California Welfare Director's Association. Merced had long been known more for its persistently low ratings on social indicators than for cutting edge programs. MerCAP provided welfare department officials with a chance to be identified with a cutting edge program. Understandably they were motivated to emphasize the positive findings of the evaluation and downplay failures—always a tendency, but accentuated in this case.

Were we aware of this earlier, could we have proceeded in a different way in our efforts to get the program leaders to learn from their failures as well as touting their successes? It is not completely clear how we might have done this, but at a minimum our strategizing would have benefited from recognizing the need for organizational leaders to preserve a cutting edge profile. By the end of the evaluation process, we groped our way to presenting evaluation reports in a way that honored the role of local officials in sponsoring a demonstration in which a great deal of useful learning had taken place. We tried to elevate the learning itself as the valued outcome of the project, as befitted a demonstration project. Had we taken this tact earlier it might have helped to open the minds of our learning community targets earlier in the process. As it was, our critical stance merely reinforced the natural defensiveness of the organization.

Bringing values to the table

A final example of how peripheral vision in evaluation might be enhanced is the role of ethical standards. In our work, we tend to construct evaluations based primarily on what the funders want, informed by our own perspectives. But the focus is on doing what they want—providing summative data in MerCAP, assessing basic organizational development milestones in ComPAC, describing and drawing lessons from county experiments in CEP. The dialogue in our up-front negotiations has been about how we propose to do what they want, given resource and other constraints.

House and Howe (2000) have proposed an alternative starting point, one that puts the values of inclusive, deliberative democracy in the forefront of the evaluation process as an ethical imperative. This possibility raises the interesting question of how this type of proactive stance might have enriched the learning possibilities in the three evaluations we conducted. The main value we can see now is that it would have encouraged us to do a better job of taking seriously *all* of the potential stakeholders in the evaluation, and to focus more on what their interests were.

In MerCAP, for example, teachers were an obvious stakeholder group that was completely ignored in our design and reporting. And while we did make some efforts to speak with parents, and urged project leaders to give parents a role in program development, we did not design the evaluation in a way that provided a very good answer to the critical question of how the program affected TANF families. That question *was not* on the agenda of the funders, and in retrospect, we wonder if we might have been more forceful in negotiating to insure that it *was*.

In the case of CEP, we focused our immediate attention on how the executive directors of the commissions, and their civic engagement staff, were influenced by the instructions and technical assistance they received from the Civic Engagement Project staff and funders. Our lack of peripheral vision, however, made us less aware of the broader network of institutions and relationships that influenced their thinking. These included the statewide Executive Directors Association, the mandates from the state Prop 10 Commission, and the directives of their own commissioners. On balance these influences played an equal or even greater role in their thinking about civic engagement than the ideas emanating from the CEP.

Our Year 1 CEP evaluation report did a good job of placing local civic engagement work in the perspective of the county's own demographic realities and political culture, but was mostly blind to the way inter-organizational networks within and outside the county shaped the thinking of directors and staff. We might have sought information from the state Commission on their expectations regarding public participation, and kept the Commission and the Executive Directors Association in our routine set of dissemination contacts.

In Lassen, we became aware of the existence of another collaborative organization in the county whose mission overlapped with ComPAC. We never went out of our way to talk with them, instead getting our read on their organization from our ComPAC contacts. Even at the end of our evaluation, when we interviewed "community stakeholders" about their impressions of ComPAC, we relied primarily on ComPAC leaders for our list of interviewees.

How might negotiation about relevant stakeholders, interests, and values be built into evaluation negotiations, with what likelihood of success? It is hard to tell. One possibility is that reflective evaluators might find much less work available to them, leaving the field to those with more traditional approaches. On the other hand, our experience suggests that it is very difficult to shoehorn any kind of value-based agenda in after the fact, and has convinced us that we need to be more intentional and deliberate in our initial evaluation negotiations.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

We have argued that in our practice as evaluators we are as susceptible to the danger of tunnel vision as the leaders of the projects we observe. Like them, we need to create anxiety-free spaces in our work in which there is time to look around, take stock of what lies on the periphery of our focal concerns, and tease out where our work fits in the bigger picture. Such peripheral vision will not make our work easier, or take the place of attending to program details and evaluation procedures. As our examples have tried to demonstrate, however, it can enrich and advance our attempt to make evaluation an occasion for community learning and change.

Can evaluators be taught peripheral vision? Basketball coaches devise drills where players learn to focus on the player they are guarding at the same time they see the ball on the other side of the court. The coaches know that keeping your eye on the ball is important, but if the ball becomes one's exclusive focus there are significant costs. The advantage these coaches have over evaluators is that the basic dynamics of the game are well known in advance, even if the particular strategies of the opponents are not. By contrast, evaluators must spend a good deal of their time just figuring out what "the game" actually is, and who are its key players. It thus becomes difficult to imagine what a training regime to teach the discipline of peripheral vision in evaluation might look like.

A more hopeful perspective is that peripheral vision does not need to be taught, since it is built-in to how we see. From this perspective, what is needed is to remind ourselves to take the time to attend to the non-foveal part of our visual field: looking for distal influences on proximal activities, seeing the immediate in light of its relationship to what came before, and noting movement in the corners of

our eye that may soon bring new developments into clearer view. Perhaps what is most needed is an internal alarm, set to go off when the pace of the evaluation is most frantic, alerting us of the need to pause, relax, and look around, taking time to deliberate on our work. It should come as no surprise that practicing reflective evaluation requires evaluators who reflect on their own practice.

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