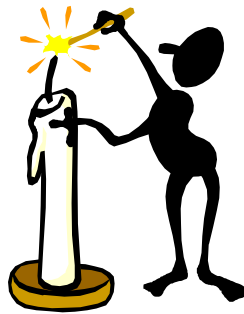


A story to be told

an evaluation method
for grassroots projects

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Introduction

This evaluation method has come out of my experience of doing evaluations with grassroots projects in London over the past five years, particularly as a CUF evaluator but also in other capacities. It is rooted in the belief that evaluation should be a positive experience for projects. Evaluation is not about the outside experts coming in to criticise but the friendly stranger coming alongside projects in order to facilitate three storytelling tasks:

- Listening to the stories coming out of the project
- Enabling people to tell and reflect on their stories
- Telling a truthful story which can be shared with others

Through my experience I have come to the following conclusions about doing evaluations with grassroots projects:

- If a project isn't working then it is too much hassle for grassroots people to keep it going.
- People inside a project are always going to understand it better than anyone coming in from the outside.
- People already have a pretty good idea of what is wrong with their project, but they often need helping telling the story so that they can then do something about it.
- The outsider can give people the confidence to tell their story as it really is. This does not always happen but if the outside evaluator is really interested in listening it often will.
- It will not happen if the project (or the dominant figures within the project) are more interested in their vision and abstract ideas than in reality.

When I talk about "as it really is" or a "truthful story" I am not talking about The Truth. The Truth is a mirage not attainable by ordinary mortals; truthfulness, honesty and the desire for reality, are the more homely virtues which evaluation needs.

Description of the process

Getting Started

Evaluations will normally start with a meeting with the worker and/or chair of the project you will be looking to get the following information:

- What are their expectations about an evaluation? What is their investment in the evaluation?

- Some sense of what the project does, what its culture is, where it has come from and where it is that now.
- Who are the main players and who is it going to be important for you to build relationships with?
- Identifying existing information and getting access to it, if possible.

You should also be looking for the meeting to:

- Identify a time when you can meet with the management group for 2 hours to concentrate solely on evaluation business.
- Get your relationship with this key gatekeeper off to a good start!

Finally it is important for you to get some of the following messages across:

- You are looking to work with the project and produce an evaluation together.
- You value the work they are already doing and their understanding of what is going on in the project.
- The evaluation can be a very positive experience for them and is not a threat.
- You will not write anything for publication before checking it out with them.

This should set you up for the initial meeting which will be the springboard for the whole evaluation. All the main themes for the telling of the story of the project will be begun at this meeting, so it is very important to get a clear two hour session dedicated to it. My experience suggests that if there is one thing you need to achieve it is this meeting.

This meeting should be with the management group. As many of the management group as possible should be gathered up to about 12. I generally find it best to go through the area is identified below recording answers on a flipchart.

What is our story? -- identifying vision and aims

This always seems to be a difficult task with grassroots groups. They seem to do what they do but not be terribly good at saying why they do it. Often they will not have any written vision or aims, frequently they will have written it but promptly forgotten it, and very rarely will a clearly articulated vision and aims be a daily reality or guiding light. It is the writing down which seems to be the problem, there is normally a vision but it is held as an oral text within the key group.

Trying to get this key group to really articulate their vision -- which may well be different from what they had previously written down can be a

useful process. Certainly you need this to happen if you are to facilitate an evaluation -- otherwise you may well find yourself judging by standards which the group itself cannot relate to.

Something which needs to be watched out for is the piling up of many aims. This generally means the group is trying to explain all its different activities which have sprung up in an ad hoc way because of individual initiatives and available funding. These aims are tricky because they don't spring from the fundamental vision of the project, they tend to confuse matters and militate against an effective evaluation.

Telling the history of the project

I have come to believe that this is the core of the evaluation process. By listening to people together telling their story the heart and soul of the project is revealed. This can be achieved quite simply by asking the group when the first germ of the project began to grow, proceeding to when it actually started, going through key events before bringing it up to the present. Trying to get people to be precise about dates will make everything much clearer for everyone. Going through this process is likely to bring up other issues -- particularly those ones people might prefer to keep hidden. These issues can be discussed at the time or noted and picked up later. Often you just have to let it flow.

The biographies of the project -- identifying people involved

After getting a picture of the story of the project it is good to move on to the people involved. It can be helpful to divide these into three groups:

- The key individuals who really own the project
- Other individuals working or volunteering in the project
- Partners and others involved in the project but outside it

This will give you a good idea of who you're going to need to contact during the evaluation. This contact can take different forms:

- Individual interviews. Face-to-face or by telephone.
- Interviews with two or more. This can be helpful when there are clear groups of people e.g. talking to female and male volunteers as distinct groups.
- Group interviews, may be using a workshop type approach
- Questionnaires. Maybe in different forms for different groups. Remember to make these as simple as possible, preferably of the tick box variety with space for people to write comments if they want.

Using a variety of different methods will help in what is called triangulation -- seeing the same issue from different perspectives. This is a crucial technique which should be used throughout an evaluation.

In grassroots groups people are always the key. They are always rooted in individual initiative and individual gifts, preferences and background will always be the most important influence on the progress of the project. Structures and written documents are always relatively insignificant. What is important is the culture of the group -- what things are considered most important, what gifts are most highly valued and what methods are considered acceptable. Discerning the culture of the group -- or conflicting cultures within the project is a key task for the evaluator. Understanding the culture of the group often helps you make sense of stories which seems bizarre.

What we do -- the activities of the project

Most mainstream evaluations seem to concern themselves with this dimension of the project -- what are the outputs. These are important, of course, but grassroots projects often find them difficult because they do not have the resources or organisation to conduct rigorous monitoring of their work. They just get on with doing what they're doing. This is why they are often good at producing results -- they do not have monitoring, risk assessment and health and safety etc. bureaucracy 'getting in the way'.

Nonetheless the evaluator will need to get a clear idea of what the project does. The following methods are useful:

- Listing all the activities that are the responsibility of the management group. Get a rough idea of what workers and volunteers deliver these and who uses them.
- Visit activities when they are taking place.
- Examine such records as do exist and try to interpret what they mean! Look for ways of supplementing these existing records e.g. reports, minutes, fundraising applications.

Are there any ways of determining the effectiveness of the activities? The following can be considered:

- Questionnaires which should be as simple and to the point as possible
- Participant observation at activities
- Individual interviews with users
- Group interviews with users
- Records of some form which indicate how users have developed through their involvement in activities or in consequence of them

How we do it -- the management of the project

Understanding the management of grassroots project is at least as important as evaluating what it does because management is often what grassroots projects really struggle with.

A basic management chart is a good place to start. These very rarely tell the whole story however. Questions like -- who actually runs things? How are decisions really made? Where do workers get their support from? Asked in the context of the management chart will often be revealing.

Sometimes management charts are very misleading. This is particularly the case when the project is actually organised around a particular individual. In this case the chart counts for nothing but only the individual workers and volunteers relationship to the dominant individual.

Further examination of the management of the project might benefit from looking at the following:

- Minutes and reports
- To who is the project management group responsible? A church management group, an umbrella group or the charity commission?
- What are the grievance and disciplinary procedures -- if any?
- Are lines of responsibility and accountability clear or confused?

Your pervading question should be: how are things really been managed here?

Resourcing the story -- project finances and fundraising

Money tends to be the overriding concern for grassroots community groups. Lack of funding and insecurity funding are almost always the groups felt need. You will not be able to meet this need but you maybe in the position to help them into a position where they are more likely to be successful in fundraising. There is always a catch in this, however, for the changes necessary in order to make fundraising more successful can easily mean the group moves away from the culture and ethos which makes it what it is. This is the dilemma which faces all grassroots groups. Do we remain small, struggling and authentic or do we professionalize and become part of the voluntary sector?

For an evaluation you will want to look at the following aspects of the project's finances and fundraising:

- Accounts. My experience suggests that projects often have reasonable accounts even when other aspects of administration are fairly chaotic. If accounts are chaotic this needs to be sorted out. You will also need to satisfy yourself that there is no evidence of financial mismanagement and corruption.
- Financial practice. There should be written rules about how money is managed. You will have to use your wisdom in dealing with common but unsafe practices such as the signing of unwritten cheques.
- Develop a funding history -- this generally closely maps the overall history of the project.
- Is funding secure or is it only short-term with no likelihood of renewal?
- Look at funding applications. Why have they succeeded? Why failed?
- Is training in fundraising needed? Or do they just need to get down and do it? Or are there fundamental problems in getting funds?
- If there are fundamental problems what are their causes? A problem with the quality of work being done? A problem in documenting and writing it up? Or is the work fundamentally difficult to fund?

Generally you need to be a bit stricter in areas concerning finance. Proper financial procedures are a safeguard that every project needs.

The story and other stories -- the wider context of the project

Some projects are good at networking, others remain introverted and isolated. Similarly some projects are deeply aware of their community, whilst others simply do their own thing regardless of what the community's real needs are. It is important to get some idea of how well-connected a project is. The following questions are worth asking:

- What other projects and agencies is this project aware of?
- What is its understanding of its local community?
- Is it connected with any local forum?
- How much is the project meeting a unique need? How is it fitting into other provision?

You may identify other organisations, projects and agencies that will be able to give you some perspective on this project.

Telling our story -- identifying joys and sorrows, hopes and threats

I have found this simple exercise useful in drawing out how people feel about the work they are doing. After going through the previous questions it can often reinforce impressions you have gained and actually get people to reveal things which they didn't feel ready to before. It is an exercise which helps them tell their story -- not so much

in narrative form, which they have done during the history session -- but in the language of feelings.

The exercise consists quite simply in asking people to say, in turn, what they joy is about the projects are and what their sorrows and hopes are, and what they feel the threats to the project are. These can be simply recorded on flipcharts as people make their contributions.

This exercise can be used with different groups beyond the management group itself.

Taking the evaluation forward

Having gone through these questions with the group you want to spend some time writing it up and reflecting. This should lead you into identifying what further work you need to do. I generally find this requires another meeting with your key contact together necessary telephone numbers, arrange visits etc. You would generally find yourself wanting to undertake some of the following activities (some of these are repeated from above):

- Visiting the group's activities
- Preparing questionnaires for workers, volunteers and users
- Arranging interviews with key people in groups
- Telephoning others with a perspective on the project
- Examining the project's documentation and records.

These can all be drawn up into a timetable which will give you a good idea of how long the evaluation is going to take. It is always a good idea to keep in regular contact with your key contacts -- checking out intuitions, asking for the questions for clarification and developing the relationship. The more they are involved in the evaluation the more meaningful and useful it will be for them.

Project staff and volunteers can be more involved in certain aspects of the evaluation, especially talking with users about their feelings concerning the project. This can cut down the work you have to do and develop the sense of an evaluation which includes everyone. In this case he will need some direct contact with users yourself, just to ensure that uncomfortable stories are not being suppressed!

Forum -- bringing it all together

In some projects it can be appropriate to run a forum for everyone involved in the project at the end of the evaluation process. This gives you the opportunity to check out some of your emerging perceptions of the project and to involve everyone in the process of the evaluation. A typical forum might run something like this:

Get everyone to stand in a line in order of how long they have been involved with the project

In threes encourage people to share what is their best memory of the project. Get people to share some of these with the whole group

Combine threes into sixes and get those sixes to write down their joys, sorrows, hopes and fears on a flipchart sheet divided into four

Put these flipchart sheets up around the room and give people time to look at them all

In plenary draw out common themes and issues. Move into a general discussion.

How the outsider sees it -- assessments and recommendations

People tend to think that evaluations are all about recommendations and immediately turn to this part of the report. This is unfortunate. As I have argued above I believe that the process of the evaluation is the most important part, but, nonetheless recommendations have their part to play.

When writing the final report I find it useful to try and write most of it in an objective manner i.e. without making overt judgments. This provides the freedom to tell the story as you see it without getting into the complexities of how good or bad it is. But you will be expected to make some kind of assessment and this can be done in a separate section. I find it best to separate these assessments into their constituent parts e.g. not

The youth club itself is well-run and enjoyed by the young people but its management can be chaotic and the participation of young women is limited

But

- Youth club nights are well-run by a well motivated staff
- All the indicators showed that young men enjoyed the youth club
- Young women find the club too male orientated and their attendance has declined
- The management tends to be chaotic unnecessarily increasing stress for workers and occasionally meaning important things don't happen

This gives a series of clear points which can be systematically addressed.

Recommendations

It is not always necessary to give any recommendations. It is in fact easy to give recommendations to projects but they won't necessarily be very useful there are three sorts of recommendations which properly won't do any good:

- Get your management committee sorted out
- Get more training
- Raise more money so you can fund an administrator, second worker etc.

The management committees of most grassroots projects tend to have big weaknesses and it is only really useful pointing out clear problems which they can solve e.g. the worker would benefit from having one member of the committee who was her line manager rather than everybody doing it at different times!

Training tends to be intimidating for grassroots groups and they almost certainly won't get any less you can point them very specifically to training that will be useful for them (and maybe some idea of how to fund it)

99% of grassroots groups are struggling for funding so the suggestion their can only be a proper group with more funding is probably the worst thing you can say to them. It is better to help them be realistic with the money that they have got.

Options

One of the best ways to help the group engage with an evaluation is to present them with some options which they can genuinely choose between. Some of the options you may be pretty sure they are never going to choose but even so putting them into the position where they can make that choice will probably do them a lot of good! Thus the problem of the male dominated youth group might be engaged with by giving them the following options:

1. Concentrate on running a good boys club with male orientated activities
2. Seeks to recruit female volunteers who can work with the young women during club nights
3. Set aside one night as girls only
4. Seek to work with Marion Brown the council youth worker with a specific brief for working with young women

A summary of the process

Activity undertaken	Issues to address	Timing
Initial contact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a trusting relationship and lessen anxiety about an evaluation • Who is the key person in this organisation? 	Up to six months
First meeting with management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Getting an overview of the organisation • Identifying the key people to talk to • Assessing what data is available • Helping people feel positive about the evaluation 	Two clear hours
Gathering data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What data do I really need and what have I got the time to get? • What are the appropriate methods to gather data I need 	Up to three months
Interviewing people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is it best to speak to people individually or in groups? • Do I need to meet people or can I use the telephone? • Prepare questions appropriate for each interview • What is the most appropriate way to record the interview • Reassure people about the evaluation and its purpose 	Can vary from two-hour meetings with the key worker to a few minutes with a user
Visiting projects activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does what I see correspond to what people say? • Look for opportunities to speak with people in an informal capacity • Get a feel for what the project is about 	Depends on the project
Reading project documents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What documents are the most useful to read? • Does what I read correspond with what people say and what I've seen? • Are the accounts properly done or are there indications of irregularities? 	Depends on the project
Forum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are my emerging perceptions that I need to check out? • What additional data do I need? 	An hour and a half

Writing up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do I need to say and what can be left out? • Is there any other information that I find I need? • What are the really important points which need to be made? • How are my recommendations actually going to help the project 	Try to do things as you go along and finish it off with a concentrated day or two
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Appendix: what is a Grassroots Project?

This description assumes that there is such a thing as the grassroots project as opposed to an ordinary voluntary organisation. What then distinguishes a grassroots project? It seems to me that the following often distinguish a grassroots project:

- Making significant use of volunteers drawn from church or family connections, leading to a family type ethos
- Employing no more than the equivalent of one full-time worker who have been recruited from within the family of volunteers
- Valuing face-to-face work with people above planning, procedures and administration. A reluctance or difficulty in writing anything down
- Dependent on the energy of one key individual or couple
- Arose out of a direct personal engagement with people in need
- Strengths tend to be in delivering the service, vision and ideas, weaknesses in monitoring, strategic thinking and keeping boundaries

A group tends to move away from a grassroots character therefore when the following start to happen:

- The recruitment of volunteers and/or workers from outside the 'family'and/or those not personally involved in the needs being addressed
- Strategic planning
- Drawing up procedures and policies
- Growth to the size that one person can't know everything that is going on
- Moves to evaluate and monitor the project

Thus, ironically, evaluation of grassroots projects tends to move them away from being grassroots projects! Part of the idea behind this process is to provide a way in which an evaluation won't necessarily do this unless the project wants to develop in this way. Thus it seeks not to

impose a vision of community work but to let people work it out for themselves through looking at themselves and being made aware of a wider perspective.

Grassroots projects are valuable because they respond directly to need and don't tend to keep going just for the sake of it i.e. to pay someone's salary. They bring together a resource of energy and commitment with a need that has been experienced at the grassroots. Because they focus so much on the need they tend to drain people's energies this can lead them to either closing down or seeking to employ people to take the strain. It is this point of employing people that is crucial especially if they bring professional experience rather than being already part of group which has created the project. It is hard to hold together the grassroots energy with professional expertise because planning and monitoring and writing things down tends to drain the fire of direct experience. I believe it is at this crux that evaluation can helpfully assist people in deciding where they want to go -- developing into a full-scale voluntary organisation or keeping it as a modest grassroots enterprise.