HOW DO ORGANIZATIONS LEARN?
Implications and Strategic Directions for Independent Evaluation

Erika Ismay MacLaughlin,
Evaluation Officer
OBJECTIVES

1. Discuss two perspectives on how organizations learn: (i) Crossan’s 4i framework; and (ii) Argyris’ “double loop learning.”

2. Discuss the implications of these perspectives for evaluation and the creation of an evaluative culture.

3. Discuss how we can organize our work differently to promote organizational learning.
• Evaluation is carried out from different perspectives – self-evaluation and independent evaluation. These two functions are complementary.

• Evaluation is increasingly regarded as a tool for learning and reform, as opposed to simply an accountability mechanism.
  • Accountability, learning, evaluative culture

• Learning is typically promoted through platforms such as events, databases and publications. But these may not be the most effective mechanisms for all types of learning.
• The 2013-2017 Evaluation Strategy – Strategic Outcomes

  • Promote accountability
    - Ensure operations are implemented systematically and in compliance with established standards

  • Promote Learning
    - Promote change in behaviour to improve progress toward organizational goals or objectives.

  • Build and Evaluative Culture
    - Systematic collection and analysis of performance information to facilitate learning and continuously improve performance.

• The outcome of learning is change in behaviour
  • “the way in which an animal or person behaves in response to a particular situation or stimulus.”
LEARNING IN ORGANIZATIONS (1/6)

Crossan’s 4i Model of Organizational Learning

- Learning can occur at different levels
- Occurs through four processes:
  - Intuition
  - Interpretation
  - Integration
  - Institutionalization
- Intuition is unique to individuals.
- Institutionalization is unique to organizations.
- Requires that:
  - Knowledge is shared beyond the individual
  - Change in behaviour is demonstrated by all members
  - Demonstrates a shared understanding
Knowledge Transfer to Change Behaviour

**Feed-forward:**
- Individuals share information to inform future activities and decision-making

**Feedback:**
- Management makes a decision which pushes individuals to change behaviour
- Individuals learn as they adapt to new requirements
- Tension between exploitation and exploration.

*Continuous information collection, transfer and use is the foundation of an evaluative culture*
LEARNING IN ORGANIZATIONS (3/6)

The Single Feedback Loop

- Operations compliance and “correcting errors”
- Monitoring against existing standards

The Double Feedback Loop

- “Strategic Renewal”
- Identifying or adjusting operational practices
Single Loop Learning

• How can we comply with our requirements?
• How can we perform better against our current objectives?

Double Feedback Learning

• Are we doing the right things given our context?
• How should existing practices/standards change to improve results?
Self-Evaluation System

• Operations monitoring against existing standards.
• Assesses performance and adjust course as required.
• Identifies relevant lessons for similar projects.

The Project Cycle

The Policy Cycle

Independent Evaluation

• Verifies operations monitoring and performance.
• Identifies lessons across multiple projects and interventions.
• Assesses interventions in context and against different operating models.
Key Points to Remember:

1. The outcome of learning is a change in behaviour – particularly in the context of organizations.

2. In organizations, learning occurs among different groups of stakeholders for different purposes.
   • How can we do our work better? Vs. How should we do our work differently?

3. Ideally, knowledge transfer is continuous.
   • Continuous collection and sharing of information to adjust behaviour and achieve results is the foundation of an evaluative culture.
IMPLICATIONS FOR EVALUATION (1/5)

Independent Evaluation

- In-depth knowledge of history / context
- Greater buy-in among stakeholders
- Insights are often context-specific
- Disincentives for identifying “failures”
- Objectivity and Independence
- Less familiarity with history / context
- Potentially less buy-in
- Can examine a range of operations and issues
- Greater buy-in among stakeholders
- Insights are often context-specific
- Disincentives for identifying “failures”
IMPLICATIONS FOR EVALUATION (2/5)

- In-depth knowledge of history / context
- Greater buy-in among stakeholders
- Insights are often context-specific
- Disincentives for identifying “failures”

“How we do our work”
- Influence project identification and design
- Influence supervision and dialogue
“What we do”

- Influence policy and strategic direction
- Influence decision-making schema

Independent Evaluation

Self Evaluation

Less familiarity with history / context

Potentially less buy-in

Can examine a range of operations and issues

Objectivity and Independence
Self-Evaluation and Independent Evaluation are complementary.

- Both functions contribute to organizational learning.
- Self-evaluation is linked to single loop learning.
- Independent evaluation is linked to double-loop learning.
- Independent evaluation can enhance the credibility of self-evaluation.
Key Points to Remember:

Learning depends on context!

• Access to knowledge
• Opportunities to apply knowledge
• Incentives to apply knowledge
How we typically organize “Learning” activities:

- Produce Knowledge
- Share Knowledge
- Use Knowledge?

Uncertainties in this approach:

- How do we know the knowledge has been used?
- How do we know that we have reached the right stakeholders?
- Do they access the knowledge at the right time?
- What incentives are in place to use the knowledge?
Organizing “learning” to change behaviour:

1. Identify desired behaviour change
   - What measurable change in behaviour do we want to see?

2. Consider users of information in context
   - Whose behaviour do we want to influence? When should the knowledge be shared?

3. Identify approach to change behaviour
   - Which activities will achieve the greatest impact?
QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How can we make evaluative knowledge more relevant to your work?

2. How can evaluative knowledge be more accessible? When is this information needed and how should it be delivered?

3. How can we create incentives to recognize and learn from failure?
Thank You!