

Most significant change technique: a supplementary evaluation tool

Sarojini Choy

(Griffith University)

John Lidstone

(Queensland University of Technology)

What was the problem?

Conventional evaluations:

- Purpose - Continuously improve content and teaching effectiveness (Sproule, 2000).
- Focus - on predetermine objectives of the course, not necessarily those of the learners or sponsors (unless customised)
- Focus largely on teaching rather than learning (Denson, Loveday & Dalton, 2010)

Traditional approaches to evaluation

- Mostly surveys – reliance on quantitative data.
- Indicate satisfaction to sets of items based on the learning content, aspects of teaching, and method of delivery
- Findings of primary interest to the facilitators and providers, not necessarily the students or their sponsors.

Limitations

- Little practical information for instructors on how to improve new teaching strategies around learner-centred instruction, problem based learning and complex learning (Frick, Chadha, Watson and Zlatkovska, 2010)
- Other limitations (Cohen, 1981; Denson, Loveday & Dalton, 2010; Feldman, 1989; Frick, Chadha, Watson, Wang & Green, 2008a, 2008b; Kulik, 2001; and Spiel, Schober and Reimann, 2006)

Supplementary evaluation

- Individual facilitators conduct own evaluation, as part of action research/action learning, but do not publish.

Our project

- 18 Senior managers completed a leadership course
- What were the secondary outcomes - those of personal significance to the participants

Most Significant Change - MSC

- MSC - first developed by Davis (1996) to monitor and evaluate complex participatory rural development programs with diverse implementation and outcomes.
- Based on stories about changes that participants experience during and as a result of a particular project or program – beyond pre-defined indicators.
- Highlights the secondary outcomes - those of personal significance to the participants.

Theory

- Founded on the theory of evolutionary epistemology – contingency on learning
- Individuals' stories constructed and derived from socio-cultural contexts (Lave and Wenger, 2003).
- Constructivist subjective epistemology - benefits of learning translated and constructed in socially meaningful outcomes.

Technique

- MSC is non-threatening
- Offers genuine input from the participants' perspectives
- Participatory in nature
- Dialogical story based - identifies the unintentional, complex and diverse outcomes beyond the objectives of the course.

Ten steps

1. Getting started: establishing champions and getting familiar with the approach
2. Establishing 'domains of change'
3. Defining the reporting period
4. Collecting stories of change
5. Reviewing the stories within the organizational hierarchy
6. Providing stakeholders with regular feedback about the review process
7. Setting in place a process to verify the stories if necessary
8. Quantification
9. Conducting secondary analysis of the stories en masse
10. Revising the MSC process.

Steps we used

Step 4: Collecting stories of change

Step 9: Conducting secondary analysis of the stories en masse

Data collection

- Purposive interviews:
 - What positive or negative changes have you observed in you and your working life during the time that you have been studying for the Master of Education degree?
 - Which of these changes do you consider to be the most significant?
 - Why do you consider it to be the most significant?

Data analysis

- Inductive approach - coding and analysis to narrow into common themes
- Independent analysis

Most significant - positive changes

- increase in self confidence (89 references)
- change as a person (63 references)
- recognition and respect by others (33 references)
- ability to make more informed decision making (24 references)
- engaging others more than before (19 references)
- now accepting others' views (11 references).

Most significant - negative changes

- Negative changes that were considered significant by the students were:
 - envy (5 references)
 - increased workload (3 references)
 - lack of recognition/appreciation of the 'new leaders' by a few work supervisors (3 references).

Most fundamental

- Self confidence - major transformations within oneself which in turn stimulated and facilitated changes in other areas
- *... my bosses now have a high regard for me. Yes. Because then I can speak confidently in meetings. I can contribute. I can share some of the knowledge that I acquired during my course of study with them. So they tend to appreciate that. [P10]*

- *It has given me the confidence as a lady, a female leader amongst all men to take on any challenges that may come. [P 09]*
- *I'm a changed person... I do not talk like the way I used to talk. I do not think like the way I used to think. [P04]*
- *The old me is waiting for things to happen but the new me is taking the initiative to do things, so I think there's been a lot of change in me. [P05]*

Three advantages of MSC

1. Identified the values that prevail in the cultural, workplace and community contexts of the students.
2. Encouraged students to critically evaluate the changes they experienced and explain which were most important.
3. Their stories have delivered a richer picture of the immediate impact of the course.

Limitations

1. Data reflects the views of only the students.
2. Other stakeholders were not engaged so the wider impact of the course remains unknown.

Conclusions

- Adapted MSC technique forms a useful tool for gathering qualitative data for a comprehensive evaluation of capacity building courses.
- Extends beyond conventional data to highlight the social benefits of education and training programs.
- Potential to add MSC to repertoire of evaluation techniques and tools.