Evaluative Thinking

Identifying Assumptions
Introductions
Why am I here?

I believe that evaluative thinking can make more effective those who are deeply committed to and authentically engaged in making the world a better place. Through [these workshops] I aspire to make my own small contribution toward realizing the vision of an experimenting global community, one characterized by commitment to reality-testing, respect for different perspectives, and open dialogue about evidence – a world in which ongoing learning is valued and practiced, and knowledge is generated and used.

Michael Quinn Patton
Program evaluation consultant
Introductions

Please share:

• Your name
• Your project(s)/area of work
• When you hear the word ???, what comes to mind?
## ET Workshop Series

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target audience</th>
<th>Round 1 Identifying Assumptions</th>
<th>Round 2 Seeking Evidence</th>
<th>Round 3 Taking Action</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group 1 Field-based staff</td>
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<td>Group 2 Senior program staff</td>
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<td>Group 3 Country leadership</td>
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ET Workshop Series

NINE WORKSHOPS IN ALL: 1 PER GROUP PER ROUND

GROUP 1
FIELD-BASED STAFF

GROUP 2
SENIOR PROGRAM STAFF

GROUP 3
COUNTRY LEADERSHIP

ROUND 1

• Introduction to evaluative thinking
• Identifying assumptions
• Multiple perspectives
• Theory of Change (ToC) Pathway Models

ROUND 2

• Using the ToC Pathway Models to determine learning plan scope
• Developing learning questions
• Components of a learning plan
• Learning plan alignment

ROUND 3

• Making meaning from results
• Participatory analysis
• Making informed decisions (utilization)
• Communicating results
Our Workshop Goals

You will…

1. Understand what evaluative thinking is, why it is important and how to practice it
2. Introduce theory of change (ToC) Pathway Models and how to use them
3. Identify barriers to ET and ways to overcome them
4. Present strategies for supporting ET work
5. Demonstrate how to connect ToCs and ET work directly with formal evaluation planning and implementation.
Your Workshop Goals

What would YOU like to get out of this workshop?

“For me, this workshop will be a success if…”

1. Jot down your ideas on a piece of paper.
2. Share: As we go around the room, select one goal to share that has not been shared by someone else.
A little housekeeping…

• Shared norms for the workshop
• Consent form and pre-workshop survey,
• Learning-to-action plan
• Post-workshop survey
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Task</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:30am</td>
<td>Introductions and goals, consent form, pre-workshop survey</td>
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<tr>
<td>9:00am</td>
<td>Defining and defending ET</td>
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<tr>
<td>9:30am</td>
<td>Theory of change Pathway Models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00am</td>
<td>Break</td>
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<tr>
<td>10:15am</td>
<td>Strategies for supporting ET work</td>
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<tr>
<td>11:30am</td>
<td>Reflect and debrief, post-workshop survey</td>
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<td>12:00pm</td>
<td>Close</td>
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What is Evaluative Thinking?
The motorcycle is the project; the sidecar is MEAL, traditionally seen as slightly separate, an extra burden, though part of the project. Think of ET as the gasoline that runs the bike and sidecar.
What is Evaluative Thinking?

Overcoming our own prejudices and our avoidance of the truth.

If I say “doctor”, what image comes to mind?

What about “hairdresser?”
What is Evaluative Thinking?

“The human condition: insidious prejudice, stultifying fear of the unknown, contagious avoidance, beguiling distortion of reality, awesomely selective perception, stupefying self-deception, profane rationalization, massive avoidance of truth— all marvels of evolution’s selection of the fittest.

[Evaluative thinking] is our collective effort to outwit these human propensities— when we choose to use it.”

Halcolm
(in Patton 2008)
What is Evaluative Thinking?

“Evaluative thinking is an activity. *Evaluative thinking is a way of doing business.* This distinction is critical. It derives from studies of evaluation use. Evaluation [or MEAL] is more useful—and actually used—when the program and organizational culture manifests evaluative thinking.”

Michael Quinn Patton
Preface to 2014 InterAction Report,
Embracing Evaluative Thinking for Better Outcomes:
Four NGO Case Studies
Evaluative Thinking: Formal definition

“Evaluative thinking involves being results oriented, reflective, questioning, and using evidence to test assumptions.” (Wind & Carden)

ET is “questioning, reflecting, learning, and modifying … conducted all the time. It is a constant state-of-mind within an organization’s culture and all its systems.” (Bennett & Jessani)

ET is “a type of reflective practice” that integrates the same skills that characterize good evaluation—“asking questions of substance, determining what data are required to answer specific questions, collecting data using appropriate strategies, analyzing collected data and summarizing findings, and using the findings”—throughout all of an organization’s work practices. (Baker & Bruner)

ET is another way of talking about analysis and critical thinking, as per the MEAL Competency Model (Competency No. 6)
Evaluative Thinking: Formal definition

ET is critical thinking applied in the context of evaluation (or MEAL), motivated by an attitude of inquisitiveness and a belief in the value of evidence, that involves:

1. Identifying assumptions
2. Posing thoughtful [learning] questions
3. Pursuing deeper understanding through reflection and multiple perspective taking
4. Making informed decisions in preparation for action

(BUCKLEY, ARCHIBALD, HARGRAVES & TROCHIM, 2015)
Critical Thinking vs. Evaluative Thinking

Critical thinking: Using careful analysis to form a judgement; not taking things at face value.
Critical Thinking vs. Evaluative Thinking

Evaluative thinking is critical thinking plus … proactive behaviors such as …

• Posing questions
• Seeking evidence
• Deciding to act (or not act) based on evidence
Evaluative Thinking: Where it fits in

MEAL requires:

• Knowledge: understanding of the “how” and “why” of basic MEAL concepts, terms, methods and resources

• Working skills: observation, analysis, communication, etc.

• Thinking skills: reflection, questioning, strategizing, mental modeling, perspective taking, decision making, the ability to identify assumptions

• Attitudes: belief in the value of MEAL, an intrinsic motivation to pursue evidence
What does Evaluative Thinking sound and look like?

Photo by CRS staff
Evaluative Thinking
What it sounds and looks like in a program work context

Things you may hear:
• Why are we assuming this?
• How do we know?
• What evidence do we have?
• What is the thinking behind the way we do this?
• How could we do this better?
• How does this connect to our intended outcomes?
• Our stakeholder’s perspective on this might be...

Things you may see:
• More evidence gathering
• More feedback (all directions)
• Reflective conversations among staff, beneficiaries, leadership, etc.
• More model making/illustrating thinking
• More motivation to do systematic MEAL work
• Program evolution
• More effective staff and programs
• Greater field staff influence over project decisions
Why is Evaluative Thinking crucial?

Continuous reflection and learning allows us to respond and adapt.

In other words...

We can improve our work more efficiently in order to make a larger impact.

We can minimize risks associated with relying on our assumptions.
Why is Evaluative Thinking crucial?

—

Use!

How evaluations are used affects the spending of billions of dollars to fight problems of poverty, disease, ignorance, joblessness, mental anguish, crime, hunger and inequality.
Calls for changes in how we work
Learning to think evaluatively

Experience in thinking can be won, like all experience in doing something, only through practice.

HANNAH ARENDT
PHILOSOPHER
**Principles for Promoting ET**


Incorporate incremental experiences (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Brookfield, 2012).

Evaluative thinking is not a born-in skill, nor does it depend on any particular educational background. Therefore, promoters should offer opportunities for it to be intentionally practiced by all who wish to develop as evaluative thinkers (Brookfield, 2012; Ericsson & Charness, 1994).

Evaluative thinkers must be aware of—and work to overcome—assumptions and belief preservation (Brookfield, 1995; Lord et al., 1979; Nkwake, 2013).

In order to best learn to think evaluatively, the skill should be applied and practiced in multiple contexts and alongside peers and colleagues (Bransford et al., 1999; Brookfield, 2012; Foley, 1999; Halpern, 1998; Simon, 2000).
Learning to think evaluatively

- Anyone can do it, but it is not trivial and requires regular practice.
- Requires a “safe space” for questioning, identifying assumptions, making suggestions.
- Start with small changes and ramp up (one can’t change the culture of a program or organization over night).
- Must be applied in multiple contexts alongside peers and colleagues.
- Learn from how others in CRS are doing it.
Connecting ET to Evaluation

• Harness the power of knowledge workers (those who know the most about the program and how to improve it, but have the least time to do more with that knowledge) through conversation

• Make sure that good ET is the basis for all evaluation (both formal and informal), then make informed decisions about which learning questions require formal evidence gathering
Working with questions: Putting ET to use

- Reflect on identified assumption, pose question
  - Less formal evidence gathering needed
  - Formal evidence gathering needed
  - No evidence needed
  - Internally credible evidence
  - Systematic, externally credible evidence

Logical conclusion

- Do nothing
- Immediate adaptation
- Modification/program plan review
- Strategic decision making
Reflection

Take the first 3 minutes to consider the following questions and jot down notes to yourself. Then, share your thoughts with your neighbor for the remaining 7 minutes.

- How would you explain evaluative thinking to someone you had just met? One of your stakeholders?
- How could a culture of evaluative thinking make a difference in your context?
Theory of Change Pathway Models
Theory of Change Pathway Model

WORKSHOP 1

INCREASE KNOWLEDGE

CHANGE ATTITUDES

WORKSHOP 2

INCREASE SKILLS

CHANGE BEHAVIORS

SHARE WITH PEERS

OVERCOME BARRIERS

COMMUNITY IMPROVES

FOLLOW-UP

ACTIVITIES

Activities

SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES

Outputs

MID-TERM OUTCOMES

Intermediate Results

LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

Strategic Objectives
Theory of Change Pathway Models

Understanding what is *really* going on!

Participants register for workshop

Participants attend workshop

Facilitators provide written resources

Participants change their behavior

Participants’ knowledge increases

Participants gain skills necessary for change

Participants motivation to change increases
Theory of Change Pathway Model

Some interventions are not especially complicated ...
Theory of Change Pathway Model

… but some are more complicated!

Theory of Change – UBALE Project, Malawi
How ToC Pathway Model and Proframe relate

**PROFRAME**
- Inputs
- Assumptions
- Indicators
- Measurement

**ToC PATHWAY MODEL**
- Core program model elements: Activities, outputs, intermediate results, strategic objectives
- Causality/Program Theory
- Shows “sub-programs”
- Identifies questions
- Tells “story” graphically

**Assumptions**
- Shows
- “sub-programs”
**Indicators**
- Identifies
- questions
**Measurement**
- Tells “story” graphically
Theory of Change Pathway Models

• How do our activities (step-by-step) contribute to our intended outcomes?
• What are our assumptions about how/why things connect?
• What’s missing?
• What’s unnecessary?
Theory of Change Pathway Models

Activities: WORKSHOP 1, WORKSHOP 2, FOLLOW-UP

Outputs: INCREASE KNOWLEDGE, CHANGE ATTITUDES, INCREASE SKILLS

Intermediate Results: SHARE WITH PEERS, OVERCOME BARRIERS, CHANGE BEHAVIORS

Strategic Objectives: COMMUNITY IMPROVES
ToC Pathway Model Review Guidance

• Look over the provided model (“Reaching for their Potential”)
• Use the ToC Pathway Model review guidance handout provided to help you consider things like:
  • What assumptions are being made
  • Which pathways seem “key”?  
  • Are the outcomes described/defined in the way you would describe/define them?
  • Which nodes and/or links have existing evidence (formal or informal)
  • Which nodes and/or links do you see as in need of evidence?
Reflection

Take the first 3 minutes to consider the following questions and jot down notes to yourself. Then, share your thoughts with your neighbor for the remaining 7 minutes.

• How do ToC Pathway Models contribute to MEAL?
• How might you support the development of ToC Pathway Models?
  • Practically
  • Culturally

• In your organization, when might you as leaders want to promote the use of ToC Pathway Models
  • During the project cycle?
  • Over the course of a year?
Break
Your abridged memoir

- Write the story of your life in 6 words.
- You have 5 minutes.
Critical Conversation Role-Play
ET Strategies and Activities

1. Create an intentional ET learning environment
ET Strategies and Activities

2. Establish a habit of scheduling meeting time focused on ET
3. Use role-play, simulation or an imaginary “walk-through” when considering evaluation strategies
ET Strategies and Activities

4. Use a diagram or illustration to explain thinking with colleagues
ET Strategies and Activities

5. Engage in supportive, critical peer review
ET Strategies and Activities

6. Engage in MEAL
Supporting Evaluative Thinking

- Be open to questioning, various perspectives and plausible alternatives
- Encourage trust-based, safe communication among all staff, beneficiaries, supervisors and other stakeholders
- Demonstrate reflection (My observations indicate I may have been more effective if …)
- Identify ET champions and provide time and space for them to train/support others
- Build ET into everyday activities (planning meetings, regular communication, etc.)
- Reward evaluative thinking
- Other ideas?
Learning-to-Action Plan
Summary

• ET is a “habit of mind,” motivated by a desire to always do better, that is characterized by identifying assumptions, developing learning questions, seeking evidence and making informed decisions.

• Organizations and programs that want to maximize efficiency and impact should consciously adopt a culture of ET, where all members of the organization support ET and engage in ET conversations and habits together.

• Promoting ET is as simple as asking a colleague, “what assumptions to you think we are making in this situation?”
Reflection

• In your experience, when and where does ET take place in your organization (if at all)?

• What will your message be to the staff who will participate in the “Level 1” and “Level 2” workshops?

• How can MEAL advisors best support greater ET?
Workshop Feedback

Thinking about today’s workshop:
• What are some key “takeaways” for you?
• What are you still unsure about?
• How could today’s activities better meet the goals set out in the morning?

Use the sticky notes provided. Stick your responses to the corresponding chart paper.
Organizing your ET notebook
## Organizing your ET notebook

### Handouts

- Consent form
- Pre-workshop survey
- What is evaluative thinking?
- Principles for promoting ET
- ToC Pathway Models
- ToC Pathway Model review guidance
- Example model: Reaching for their potential
- Critical conversation role-play
- ET strategies and activities
- Learning-to-action plan
- Post-workshop survey
Post-Workshop Survey

• Please fill out the Post-Workshop Survey
Thank you!
References


