

Evaluating Outreach: Methods, Praxis, Standpoints and Policy

Wednesday 23 March – Thursday 24 March 2016,

University of Warwick

Agenda

This invited symposium has the aim of encouraging dialogue, debate and the development of a network of interest that is concerned to work collaboratively in building expertise and initiatives in the evaluation of outreach. Within our aim of building collaboration with a common purpose, we have designed this two-day symposium to be as interactive as possible and always with a view to providing space for critical challenge.

Our initial planning discussions for this symposium highlighted how important it is to respect the differences that arise from our various professional and institutional locations, and indeed our experiences and preferences as to how to proceed in respect of evaluation of outreach. In this regard, colleagues may be interested in the perspectives of agonistic democracy associated with finding consensus (or not) amongst division (see <http://pavilionmagazine.org/chantal-mouffe-agonistic-democracy-and-radical-politics/>).¹ In organising this symposium we have endeavoured to include as many perspectives and opinions (ie your contributions) as possible.

To support common purpose we have organised three Town Hall meetings in our two days together where colleagues can contribute as a community of interest to reflections and suggestions on how we might proceed both during our symposium and beyond. We have also provided an open space we have called the Tablecloth Room which will have materials for colleagues to leave their thoughts if they so wish but which primarily is for good chat over tea, coffee and lunch. The other sessions have been designed to enable us to bring our differences to centre stage without any attempt to rule them out; to be reflexive about our own practices and knowledge in evaluation; and to be informative and respectfully challenging in respect of evaluation methodologies.

Our objectives are:

- To map out the diverse interests, standpoints, praxis and approaches to evaluation amongst symposium members;
- To provide a structured focus for a critical discussion of a range of methodologies used to evaluate the effectiveness of outreach activities in widening participation to higher education;

¹ As Chantal Mouffe notes (<http://pavilionmagazine.org/chantal-mouffe-agonistic-democracy-and-radical-politics/>) it is not possible to rule out antagonism in politics. What is required is the recognition that “properly political questions always involve decisions which require a choice between alternatives that are undecidable from a strictly rational point of view.”

- To contribute to the development of a framework (or frameworks) for evaluation of outreach.

Preparation

Symposium participants will be provided with a number of materials that have been designed to support engagement. These will include any position statements of members of the symposium together with brief biographical data; a review of the methodological approaches in outreach research; and a guide to evaluation research in other policy sectors.

Symposium participants will also be invited to make specific contributions to the various activities planned.

Outputs

- A summary and discussion document based on the proceedings of the symposium;
- Discussions current for a special issue with *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* (ISI 2014 - 1.22)
- Informing the development of a potential OFFA and Sutton Trust collaborative 'call for research' in evaluation of outreach;
- Online network for further discussion and the development of a members' resource bank.

Wednesday 23 March 2016

The programme on Wednesday is framed to explore the broader contextual, economic, political and cultural issues that are associated with evaluation of outreach. This includes recognition of the diversity of the sector and diversity of purpose; of methodologies and of location. The underlying idea of Wednesday, therefore, is to set the tone that, as in any eco-system, diversity is a strength that enables the contestation of meaning and purpose to remain always in play.

- **1130-1300 Registration and lunch**
- 1300-1430 **Welcomes**, Introductions, Housekeeping, Purposes and Ambition of the Symposium (Rachael and Christina)
- 1430-1600 **Town Hall Discussion: Why Evaluate? What does it tell us?**
Addressing the topic 'Why Evaluate?' this opening session is organised as a panel of speakers who have been asked to consider the question of 'Why Evaluate?' from their different purposes, languages, institutional positions and standpoints. The aims are to :
 - (a) recognise and retain our differences as relevant to the achievement of 'common purpose'; and, importantly,
 - (b) draw on this discussion as a constructive opening that enables us to map out the complexity and diversity of interests in the sector.

- 1600-1630 **Tea, Coffee and biscuits in the Tablecloth Room**. Tablecloth is an open space for informal discussion, reflection and, if so minded, recording thoughts (on tablecloths). Pens will be provided!
- 1630-1730 **PechaKucha: Fail Better** ²
Through a series of case studies, this PechaKucha event (<http://www.pechakucha.org> - 20 images x 20 seconds per image + 5 minutes discussion) will draw on symposium members' experiences of undertaking evaluation of outreach and what change (if any) happened subsequently.
As the title suggests the aims are to provide reflections on:
(a) how evaluations are designed with change in mind and particularly how change is understood (scale of change designed, underlying/explicit assumptions about how change happens); and
(b) with hindsight, how evaluation for change might be improved (including discussion of how, even if the world were perfect, there are limitations to what evaluation alone can do).
- 1900-late **Dinner**, Private Dining Room, Scarman House

Thursday 24 March 2016

Thursday has two purposes. One is quite pragmatic and it is to consider the range of evaluation methodologies that enables us to consider the crucial question of evaluation – ie what works? We do so accepting (though challenging) there can be a status hierarchy here (though not as neat as quantitative versus qualitative implies); that ethical implications of any evaluation can be significant; and that the implementation of any evaluation requires skills, knowledge and resource.

The other purpose is rather more difficult. It is to recognise that to develop a framework for common purpose we have to reach the point of decision making – how will we proceed in terms of evaluation methodologies? Can we agree and develop a framework for evaluation? If so, what will be counted in and what counted out (perhaps for now)?

- **0900-0930 Town Hall Discussion: Where we've got to so far**

This short opening discussion will engage all symposium participants who will be asked to come along with up to three bullet points on 'Where we've got to so far'. The purpose is to provide the bridge from Wednesday to Thursday.

- **0930 - 1100 Debating Society: Presenting the Case for:**

This series of debates has the aim of informing symposium members of the research that has been undertaken using specific methodological tools and techniques via demonstrations

² With credit for this phrase to Jonathan Heron, IATL, University of Warwick,
<http://www.failbetter.co.uk/company/team.html>

of how such research is conducted; the ethical questions; and outcomes. The tenor of these presentations will be that of examining the strengths and weakness of particular methodological approaches.

- Randomised Control Trials
 - Participatory Action Research
 - Mixed Methodologies
 - Qualitative Methodologies
- **1100-1130 Coffee, Tea and Biscuits in the Tablecloth Room.**
 - **1130-1300 Designing a programme of evaluation**
In teams, colleagues will be asked to design, and present, an approach to evaluation against a set issue.
 - **1300-1400 Lunch in the Tablecloth Room**
 - **1400-1530 Town Hall Discussion: Deliberating a Framework for Outreach Evaluation (Rachael Tooth and Christina Hughes)**

There are many many examples, through practice, experience and formal evaluation, of the power of outreach activities in changing lives. Yet the national and institutional policy questions remain: *What are the most effective practices? Is it possible to develop an agreed (or set of agreed) framework(s) for the evaluation of outreach that would provide evidence of effectiveness and can inform national and institutional policy?*

Based on our discussions over this two day period, this final session will ask symposium members for their advice and guidance as to how to proceed to develop strength in evaluation that provides confidence in the sector that practice, research and policy are delivering the outcomes and value-for-money that are required.

- **1530-1600 Tea, Coffee, Biscuits in the Tablecloth Room**
- **1600 - Departures**