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Empowerment Evaluation: Building Communities of Practice and a Culture of Learning

David M. Fetterman¹

Stanford University

Empowerment evaluation is the use of evaluation concepts, techniques, and findings to foster improvement and self-determination. Program participants—including clients—conduct their own evaluations; an outside evaluator often serves as a coach or additional facilitator depending on internal program capabilities. Empowerment evaluation has three steps: 1) establishing a mission; 2) taking stock; and 3) planning for the future. These three steps build capacity. They also build a sense of community, often referred to as communities of practice. Empowerment evaluation also helps to create a culture of learning and evaluation within an organization or community.

KEY WORDS: empowerment; evaluation; communities of practice.

Empowerment evaluation is the use of evaluation concepts, techniques, and findings to foster improvement and self-determination. Empowerment evaluation has an unambiguous value orientation—it is designed to help people help themselves and improve their programs using a form of self-evaluation and reflection.² Program participants—including clients—conduct their own evaluations; an outside evaluator often serves as a coach or additional facilitator depending on internal program capabilities. The aim is to try to understand what is going on in a situation from the participant's own perspective as accurately and honestly as possible and then proceed to improve

¹To whom correspondence should be addressed at School of Education, 485 Lasuen Mall, 333 Stanford University, Stanford, California 94305-3096; e-mail: davidf@stanford.edu.

²Empowerment evaluation creates an environment conducive to three types of reflection: content reflection, focusing on the content of an issue; process reflection, highlighting the methods used to resolve an issue; and premise reflection, designed to examine the underlying assumptions or premise.

it with meaningful goals and strategies and credible documentation. As in traditional evaluation, empowerment evaluation findings are based on data, including harsh criticism of program performance as well as information about program strengths. An important difference, however, is that the stakeholders establish their own goals, processes, outcomes, and impacts and then they proceed to assess themselves in terms of those goals, strategies, and evidence.

Empowerment evaluation has been adopted in a wide array of settings and programs, including tribal reservations, inner city schools, higher education, and the Environmental Protection Agency. It has also been used in battered women's shelters, adolescent pregnancy prevention programs, substance abuse prevention programs, and a national educational reform movement (see Fetterman, Kaftarian, & Wandersman, 1996 for case examples).

THREE STEPS: OVERVIEW

Empowerment evaluation has three steps. The first step is establishing a mission or vision statement about the program. The second step, taking stock, involves identifying and prioritizing the most significant program activities. Then program staff members and participants rate how well the program is doing in each of those activities, typically on a 1 (*low*) to 10 (*high*) scale, and discuss the ratings. The third step involves charting a course for the future by establishing goals, specifying strategies, and agreeing on credible evidence or documentation. This third step is really a blueprint for the future. It establishes a specific direction for the group and organizes and galvanizes their efforts. It also launches them into a research and evaluation mode, in which self-reflection is automatic and routine.

The empowerment evaluation community or group tests both their assumptions and specific strategies associated with their plans for the future, by collecting, analyzing, and interpreting relevant data. Mid course corrections are made if the data suggest that the strategies are not working or that the assumptions are faulty. The process is cyclical. The group takes stock again to compare their current state with their earlier baseline or taking stock session. Then the group plans for the future again with updated information about where they stand. In essence, evaluation becomes a part of the normal planning and management of the program, which is a means of institutionalizing and internalizing evaluation.

The next part of this discussion provides detailed directions concerning the three steps in order to help both program managers and practitioners practice empowerment evaluation in the field (see Fetterman, 2001 for details concerning the steps and additional case examples).

Mission

The first step in an empowerment evaluation is to ask program staff members and participants to define their mission. This step can be accomplished in a few hours. An empowerment evaluator facilitates an open session with as many staff members and participants as possible. They are asked to generate key phrases that capture the mission of the program or project. This is done even when an existing mission statement exists, because there are typically many new participants and the initial document may or may not have been generated in a democratic open forum. This allows fresh new ideas to become a part of the mission and it also allows participants an opportunity to voice their vision of the program. It is common for groups to learn how divergent their participants' views are about the program, even when working together for years. The evaluator records these phrases, typically on a poster sheet (see Table I). Then a workshop participant is asked to volunteer to write these telescopic phrases into a paragraph or two. This document is shared with the group, revisions and corrections are made in the process, and then the group is asked to accept the document on a consensus basis—they don't have to be in favor of 100% of the document, they just have to be willing to live with it.

Taking Stock

The second step in an empowerment evaluation is taking stock. This step can also be conducted in a few hours. It has two sections. The first

Table I. Mission Statement^a

Forge partnerships with community—professional, geographic, economic
Train educational leaders of tomorrow
Conduct research to improve education—nationally and internationally
Provide theoretical foundation
Create knowledge
Scholastic and fun; diverse learning environment
Influence local, state, national, international policy
Play a key role in educational reform
Develop field of education as a profession
Facilitate career employment
Foster collaboration and collegiality
Make connections between theory and practice
Teach language and jargon associated with education
Provide access to resources—where and how?
Learn to use emerging technology

^aThis is a poster documenting the first phase in developing a School of Education Mission statement. The facilitator records program participant phrases concerning the mission on this poster sheet. Later these phrases are transformed into a more formal document, ranging from a paragraph to a couple of pages.

involves generating a list of current key activities that are crucial to the functioning of the program. Once again, the empowerment evaluator serves as a facilitator, asking program staff members and participants to list the most significant features and/or activities associated with the program. A list of 10–20 activities is sufficient. After generating this list, it is time to prioritize and determine which are the most important activities meriting evaluation at this time.

One tool used to minimize the time associated with prioritizing activities involves voting with dots. The empowerment evaluator gives each participant five dot stickers and asks the participants to place them by the activity on which the participant wants to focus. The participant can distribute them across five different activities or place all five on one activity. Counting the dots easily identifies the top 10 activities. The 10 activities with the most dots become the prioritized list of activities meriting evaluation at that time. (This process avoids long arguments about why one activity is valued more than another is, when both activities are included in the list of the top 10 program activities anyway) (see Table II).

The second phase of taking stock involves rating the activities. Program staff members and participants are asked to rate how well they are doing concerning each activity on a 1–10 scale, with 10 as the highest level

Table II. Taking Stock Prioritization^a

Coursework	●●●●●●●●●●●●●●	13
Teaching	●●●●●●●●●●●●●●	13
Recruiting	●●●●●●●●●●●●●	11
Practicum/internship	●●●●●●●●●●●	8
Financial aid	●●●●●●●●●●●	8
Advising	●●●●●●●●●●●	7
Projects (applied research)	●●●●●●●●●●●	7
Curriculum	●●●●●●●●●●●	6
Defined program structure	●●●●●●●●●●●	6
Research	●●●●●●●●●●	4
Respected faculty	●●●●●●●●●●	4
Admissions	●●	2
Faculty recruitment	●●	2
Cohort activities (social)	●●	2
Communication	●●	2
Budget	●	1
Orientation (students)		
Fundraising		
Interdisciplinary collaboration		

^aThis poster captures a typical Taking Stock prioritization exercise. Dots are used to vote for the most significant activities in the program. The total number of dots for each activity have been added on the right hand side of the poster. The activities with the most dots are selected for the second stage of the Taking Stock exercise—rating the activities.

and 1 as the lowest. The staff members and participants only have minimal definitions about the components or activities at this point. Additional clarification can be pursued as needed; however, detailed definition and clarification become a significant part of the dialogue process. (The group will never reach the rating stage if each activity is perfectly defined at this point. The rating process then sets the stage for dialogue, clarification, and communication.)

Typically, they rate each of the activities while in their seats on their own piece of paper. Then they are asked to come up to the front of the room and record their ratings on a poster sheet of paper. This allows for some degree of independence in rating. In addition, it minimizes a long stream of second guessing, and checking to see what others are rating the same activities while recording ratings in the front of the room on the poster sheet.

At the same time, there is nothing confidential about the process. Program staff members and participants place their initials at the top of the matrix and then record their ratings for each activity. Contrary to most research designs, in general this system is designed to ensure that everyone knows and is influenced by each other's ratings (after recording them on the poster sheet). This is part of the socialization process that takes place in an empowerment evaluation, opening up the discussion and stepping toward more open disclosure—speaking one's truth.

The taking stock phase of an empowerment evaluation is conducted in an open setting for three reasons: (1) it creates a democratic flow of information and exchange of information; (2) it makes it more difficult for managers to retaliate because it is in an open forum; and (3) it increases the probability that the disclosures will be diplomatic because program staff members and participants must remain in that environment. Open discussions in a vacuum, without regard for workplace norms, are not productive. They are often unrealistic and can be counter productive.

Staff members and participants are more likely to give their program a higher rating if they are only asked to give an overall or gestalt rating about the program. Consequently, it is important that program staff members and participants be asked to begin by assessing individual program activities. They are more likely to give some activities low ratings if they are given an equal opportunity to speak positively about, or rate, other activities highly. The ratings can be totaled and averaged by person and by activity. This provides some insight into routinely optimistic and pessimistic participants. It allows participants to see where they stand in relation to their peers, which helps them calibrate their own assessments in the future. The more important rating, of course, is across the matrix or spreadsheet by activity. Each activity receives a total and average. Combining the individual activity averages generates a total program rating, often lower than an

external assessment rating. This represents the first baseline data concerning that specific program activity. This can be used to compare change over time³ (see Table III).

All of this work sets the tone for one of the most important parts of the empowerment evaluation process—dialogue. The empowerment evaluator facilitates a discussion about the ratings. A survey would have accomplished the same task up to this point. However, the facilitator probes and asks why one person rated communication a 6 while two others rated it a 3 on the matrix. Participants are asked to explain their rating and provide evidence or documentation to support the rating. This plants the seeds for the next stage of empowerment evaluation—planning for the future, where they will need to specify the evidence they plan to use to document that their activities are helping them accomplish their goals. The empowerment evaluator serves as a critical friend during this stage, facilitating discussion and making sure everyone is heard and at the same time being critical and asking “what do you mean by that?” or asking for additional clarification and substantiation about a particular rating or viewpoint.

Participants are asked for both the positive and negative basis for their ratings. For example, if they give communication a 3 they are asked why a 3? The typical response is because there is poor communication and they proceed to list reasons for this problem. The empowerment evaluator listens and helps record the information and then asks the question again, focusing on why it was a 3 instead of a 1. In other words, there must be something positive to report as well. An important part of empowerment evaluation involves building on strengths; even in weak areas there is typically something positive that can be used to strengthen that activity or other activities. If the effort becomes exclusively problem focused, all participants see is problems instead of strengths and opportunities to build and improve on practice.

Some participants give their programs or specific activities unrealistically high ratings. The absence of appropriate documentation, peer ratings, and a reminder about the realities of their environment—such as a high dropout rate, students bringing guns to school, and racial violence in a high school—help participants recalibrate their ratings. Participants are reminded that they can change their ratings throughout the dialogue and exchange stage of the workshop, based on what they hear and learn from their peers. The ratings are not carved in stone. However, in some cases, ratings stay higher than peers consider appropriate. The significance of this

³Program staff members and participants should return to these activity ratings on a routine basis. In some cases, a monthly comparison is needed. However, most programs return to these ratings at a 3, 6, or 12-month interval.

Table III. Taking Stock Matrix^a

Activity	PM	AM	TS	OV	AH	KO	NB	PJ	JD	JG	DF	HK	KR	JC	JW	LR	EF	HL	MW	Total	Average	
Coursework	5	8	6	7	6	6	6	8	7	6	7	6	6	7	7	6	6	6	6	6	122	6
Teaching	5	8	6	7	5	7	6	3	5	7	7	6	6	8	8	6	7	7	4	4	118	6
Recruiting students	4	7	4	4	4	5	2	1	2	4	3	4	1	5	1	3	3	3	3	1	61	3
Financial aid	1	7	1	2	0	3	1	1	3	1	2	1	0	2	1	5	3	3	3	1	38	2
Practicum	7	4	7	8	7	8	7	7	4	5	7	6	7	6	7	4	7	7	9	9	124	7
Advising	5	9	7	8	6	5	7	9	6	6	8	7	7	7	9	8	7	7	5	5	133	7
Projects	8	8	6	6	4	6	6	8	5	7	8	5	5	5	8	7	4	4	0	0	110	6
Curriculum	7	8	5	8	5	8	5	8	7	6	7	8	5	7	7	6	6	6	5	5	124	7
Defined program	8	9	7	8	6	5	5	8	6	5	5	8	4	7	9	5	5	5	3	3	118	6
Recruiting faculty	5	7	5	5	5	6	2	1	3	5	6	7	5	3	1	5	6	6	1	1	84	4
Total	55	75	54	63	48	59	47	54	48	52	60	58	46	57	58	55	54	54	35	35	54	54
Average	6	8	5	6	5	6	5	5	5	5	6	6	5	6	6	6	5	5	4	4	103	5

^aThis is a poster of the matrix used to facilitate this stage of the empowerment evaluation process. Activities are listed on the left column. Participant initials are on the top of the matrix. Individual ratings are listed for each activity in the column directly below the participant's initials. The averages are recorded on the bottom and on the right hand side of the spreadsheet. This worksheet provides a useful mechanism to enter into a dialogue about the status of the program.

process, however, is not the actual rating so much as it is the creation of a baseline, as noted earlier, from which future progress can be measured. In addition, it sensitizes program participants to the necessity of collecting data to support assessments or appraisals.

After examining four or five examples, beginning with divergent ones and ending with similar ratings (to determine if there are totally different reasons for the same or similar ratings), this phase of the workshop is generally complete. The group or a designated subcommittee continues to discuss the ratings and the group is asked to return to the next (planning for the future) workshop with the final ratings and a brief description or explanation of what the ratings meant. (This is normally shared with the group for review, a time in which ratings can still be changed, and a consensus is sought concerning the document.) This process is superior to surveys because it generally has a higher response rate—close to 100% depending on how many staff members and participants are present—and it allows participants to discuss what they meant by their ratings, recalibrate and revise their ratings based on what they learn—minimizing “talking past each other” about certain issues or other miscommunications such as defining terms differently and using radically different rating systems. Participants learn what a 3 and an 8 mean to individuals in the group in the process of discussing and arguing about these ratings. This is a form of norming, helping create shared meanings and interpretations within a group.

Planning for the Future

After rating their program's performance and providing documentation to support that rating, program participants are asked where “you want to go from here.” They are asked how they would like to improve on what they do well and not so well. The empowerment evaluator asks the group to use the taking stock list of activities as the basis for their plans for the future—so that their mission guides their taking stock phase, and their taking stock phase shapes their planning for the future. This creates a thread of coherence and an audit trail for each step of their evaluation and action plans (see Table IV).

Program staff members and participants are asked to list their goals based on the results of their taking stock exercise. They set specific goals associated with each activity. Then the empowerment evaluator asks members of the group for strategies to accomplish each goal. They are also asked to generate forms of evidence to monitor progress toward specified goals. Program staff members and participants supply all of this information (see Table V).

Table IV. Taking Stock^a

Practicum	7
Advising	7
Curriculum	7
Coursework	6
Teaching	6
Projects	6
Defined program	6
Recruiting faculty	4
Recruiting students	3
Financial aid	2

^aThis is a poster summarizing the Taking Stock exercise. It is often used to guide the initial Planning for the Future exercise. It summarizes the Taking Stock effort and rank orders the ratings for each activity from high to low.

The empowerment evaluator is not superior or inferior in the process. Staff members, participants, and evaluators are equals. The empowerment evaluator adds ideas as deemed appropriate without dominating the discussion. Their primary role is to serve as a coach, facilitator, and critical evaluative friend. The empowerment evaluator must be able to serve as a facilitator, helping program members and participants process and be heard. The evaluator must also be analytical and critical, asking or prompting participants to clarify, document, and evaluate what they are doing, to ensure that specific goals are achieved. If the evaluator is only critical and analytical, the group will walk away from the endeavor. The empowerment evaluator must maintain a balance of these talents or team up with other coaches (from within the group or outside the group) who can help them maintain this balance.

Table V. Planning for the Future, Focusing on Training Staff^a

Goals
Improve financial aid package
Strategies
Contact donors about supporting students
Contact registrar about better package
Evidence
Donor list
Calls made to donors
Funds received from donors

^aThis is a Planning for the Future poster focusing on Training Staff. The three categories used to organize this stage of the process are Goals, Strategies, and Evidence. The facilitator writes the participants' ideas down in the appropriate category on these poster sheets.

The selected goals should be established in conjunction with supervisors and clients to ensure relevance from both perspectives. In addition, goals should be realistic, taking into consideration such factors as initial conditions, motivation, resources, and program dynamics. They should also take external standards into consideration, for example, accreditation agency standards, superintendent's 5-year plan, board of trustee dictates, board standards, and so on.

In addition, it is important that goals be related to the program's activities, talents, resources, and scope of capability. One problem with traditional external evaluation is that programs have been given grandiose goals or long-term goals that participants could only contribute to in some indirect manner. There is often no link between an individual's daily activities and ultimate long-term program outcomes (in terms of these goals). In empowerment evaluation, program participants are encouraged to select intermediate goals that are directly linked to their daily activities. These activities can then be linked to larger, more diffuse goals, creating a clear chain of reasoning and outcomes.

Program participants are encouraged to be creative in establishing their goals. A brainstorming approach is often used to generate a new set of goals. Individuals are asked to state what they think the program should be doing. The list generated from this activity is refined, reduced, and made realistic after the brainstorming phase, through a critical review and consensual agreement process.

There are a bewildering number of goals to strive for at any given time. As a group begins to establish goals based on this initial review of their program, they realize quickly that a consensus is required to determine the most significant issues to focus on. These are chosen according to significance to the operation of the program, such as teaching in an educational setting; timing or urgency, such as recruitment or budget issues; and vision, including community building and learning processes.

Goal setting can be a slow process when program participants have a heavy work schedule. Sensitivity to the pacing of this effort is essential. Additional tasks of any kind and for any purpose may be perceived as simply another burden when everyone is fighting to keep their heads above water.

Developing Strategies

Program participants are also responsible for selecting and developing strategies to accomplish program goals. The same process of brainstorming, critical review, and consensual agreement is used to establish a set of strategies. These strategies are routinely reviewed to determine their effectiveness

and appropriateness. Determining appropriate strategies, in consultation with sponsors and clients, is an essential part of the empowering process. Program participants are typically the most knowledgeable about their own jobs, and this approach acknowledges and uses that expertise—and, in the process, puts them back in the “driver’s seat.”

Documenting Progress

Program staff members and participants are asked what type of documentation or evidence is required to monitor progress toward their goals. This is a critical step. Each form of documentation is scrutinized for relevance to avoid devoting time to collecting information that will not be useful or pertinent. Program participants are asked to explain how a given form of documentation is related to specific program goals. This review process is difficult and time-consuming but prevents wasted time and disillusionment at the end of the process. In addition, documentation must be credible and rigorous if it is to withstand the criticism that this evaluation is self-serving (see Fetterman, 1994, for additional discussion on this topic).

CONCLUSION

The three steps of empowerment evaluation build capacity. They also build a sense of community, often referred to as communities of practice. Empowerment evaluation also helps to create a culture of learning and evaluation within an organization or community. These contributions last well beyond a specific project. They provide people with a way of thinking about themselves, the people around them, and their environment. It empowers them to act. However, they do not act individually or alone. They act as a group or a community.

Communities of Practice

Empowerment evaluation is, in part, characterized by its communities of practice. Communities of practice are groups of individuals working together on commonly valued enterprises (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). They are formed and evolve to grapple with day-to-day issues and improve program practice.

Empowerment evaluation relies on the intellectual capital of the organization, for example, employees, staff members, and program participants. In empowerment evaluations, individuals work together in social groups

focused on tasks held in common. Participation is paramount in empowerment evaluations. Moreover, people build common understandings through their discussions and dialogue, as well as the documents they create to build new localized knowledge.

Empowerment evaluation participants model community of practice characteristics. For example, they

- (a) interact more intensively with, and know more about, others in the community than those outside the community;
- (b) hold their actions accountable (and be willing for others in the community to hold them accountable) more to the community's joint enterprise than to some other enterprise;
- (c) be more able to evaluate the actions of other members of the community than the actions of those outside the community; and
- (d) draw on locally-produced resources and artifacts to negotiate meaning more so than resources and artifacts that are imported from outside the group (Pallas, 2001).

Communities of practice help characterize empowerment evaluation and simultaneously help explain how it works.

Theories of Action and Use

Empowerment evaluation relies on the reciprocal relationship between theories of action and use at every step in the process. A theory of action is typically the espoused operating theory concerning how a program or organization works. It is a useful tool, generally based on program personnel views. This theory of action is often compared with a theory of use.⁴ The theory of use is the actual program reality (see Argyris & Schon, 1978; Patton, 1997). This is accomplished by observing what happens in practice.

People engaged in empowerment evaluations create a theory of action in their mission statement and test it against the existing theory of use during the taking stock step. Similarly, they create a new theory of action in the planning for the future step. Because empowerment evaluation is an ongoing and iterative process, stakeholders test their theories of action against theories in use in order to determine whether their strategies are being implemented as recommended or designed. The theories go hand in hand

⁴Logic models are often used to determine the logic of linkages in a program theory. Theoretically there should be logical connections between resources, activities, and outputs. Data can then be collected to determine if the described program matches the implemented program. If the connections are not clear, the logic model represents an excellent tool to initiate a dialogue about fundamental program assumptions (see Dugan, 1996).

in empowerment evaluation. The process of empowerment embraces the tension between the two types of theories and offers a means for reconciling incongruities. It is important to note the theories are not theories held by a single authority or an evaluator. They are created and tested by the group themselves.

Culture of Learning and Evaluation

Empowerment evaluation creates a culture of learning, specifically a folk culture of evaluation. People internalize the logic and values of evaluation as they participate in the process of conducting their own evaluations. This immersion process is often referred to as process use (Patton, 1997). It reinforces commitment and builds capacity while accomplishing specific group objectives. Learning, in the form of evaluation, permeates group activities, ranging from large-scale program goals to routine staff member meetings. This culture of learning and evaluation is characterized by a collective engagement, focused on identifying and addressing commonly held issues and initiatives. Participation, dialogue, deliberation, and self-determination underlie much of the ethos of this culture. Preskill and Torres (1999) refer to this as learning from evaluative inquiry. They recognize that it is "socially situated and is mediated through participants' previous knowledge and experiences (p. xix)." According to Preskill and Torres (1999, p. xx) evaluative inquiry for organizational learning and change includes

- A focus on program and organizational processes as well as outcomes.
- Shared individual, team, and organizational learning.
- Education and training of organizational practitioners in inquiry skills.
- Modeling the behaviors of collaboration, cooperation, and participation.
- Establishing linkages between learning and performance.
- Searching for ways to create greater understanding of the variables that affect organizational success and failure.
- Using a diversity of perspectives to develop understanding about organizational issues.

This culture of evaluative inquiry in the form of empowerment evaluation has the power to unleash emancipatory powers within the individual, the group, the organization, and the community. Empowerment evaluation, as such, represents a powerful force for those of us committed to changing our own communities and practice.

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