Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice

Volume 14 | Issue 1 Article 9

2017

Introducing a New Learning and Teaching Evaluation Planning Framework for Small Internally Funded Projects in Higher Education

Elaine Huber
Macquarie University, elaine.huber@uts.edu.au

Recommended Citation

Huber, E. (2017). Introducing a New Learning and Teaching Evaluation Planning Framework for Small Internally Funded Projects in Higher Education. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice, 14*(1). https://doi.org/10.53761/1.14.1.2

Introducing a New Learning and Teaching Evaluation Planning Framework for Small Internally Funded Projects in Higher Education

Abstract

Scholarly evaluation practices in learning and teaching projects are under-reported in the literature. In order for robust evaluative measures to be implemented, a project requires a well-designed evaluation plan. This research study describes the development of a practical evaluation planning framework through an action research approach, using primary data from learning and teaching practitioners in higher education. Underpinned by the literature, this framework is accessible to a wide range of disciplinary scholars and is accompanied by a set of recommendations that together contribute to the improvement of the evaluation of learning and teaching innovations in higher education.

Keywords

Evaluation, learning and teaching projects, framework, action research

Erratum

Page 3, Figure 1 caption, text in square brackets should have been deleted

Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice

Volume 14 | Issue 1 Article 9

2017

Introducing a New Learning and Teaching Evaluation Planning Framework for Small Internally Funded Projects in Higher Education

Elaine Huber
Macquarie University, elaine.huber@uts.edu.au

Introducing a New Learning and Teaching Evaluation Planning Framework for Small Internally Funded Projects in Higher Education

Abstract

Scholarly evaluation practices in learning and teaching projects are under-reported in the literature. In order for robust evaluative measures to be implemented, a project requires a well-designed evaluation plan. This research study describes the development of a practical evaluation planning framework through an action research approach, using primary data from learning and teaching practitioners in higher education. Underpinned by the literature, this framework is accessible to a wide range of disciplinary scholars and is accompanied by a set of recommendations that together contribute to the improvement of the evaluation of learning and teaching innovations in higher education.

Keywords

Evaluation, learning and teaching projects, framework, action research

Erratum

Page 3, Figure 1 caption, text in square brackets should have been deleted

Introduction

In the higher-education sector, small grants, also known as internal or local funding, are one way to support projects that investigate the effects of an intervention on learning and teaching outcomes (Clark & Hall 2008). Such projects and investigations have the potential to instigate the start of a change process that brings ideas, concepts and implementation to a wider audience through associated dissemination activities such as presentations and written publications (Gannaway et al. 2013; Hinton 2014).

Similarly, processes of formative evaluation (Cronbach 1982) can yield findings that can immediately affect the project or intervention design and lead to improved project outcomes (Harris, Jones & Coutts 2010; Patton 1994). Evaluation is often mandated by external funding organisations (Chesterton & Cummings 2011; Rog 2015). However, smaller grants (which can start from as little as $1,000 but tend to be capped around $10,000) offered by internal funders in Australian universities do not always specify evaluative requirements, other than mandating that evaluation must be carried out; and those that are more specific often do not follow up or implement measures to ensure that evaluation is enacted (Huber & Harvey 2013).

Scholarly evaluation practices in learning and teaching projects are under-reported in the literature (Alexander 1999; Christie 2003; Smith 1993). The reasons for this are unclear; however, some emerging research suggests that evaluation is influenced by a project leader's conception of evaluation as well as the lack of resources (in terms of both time and budget) to implement evaluative measures (Huber & Harvey 2016a; Rog 2015; Worthern & Sanders 2011). Provision of resources to support evaluation can also influence engagement with learning and teaching evaluation (Smeal, Southwell & Locke 2011).

For robust evaluative measures to be implemented, a project requires a well-designed evaluation plan. Studies have found that it is often in the planning stage that evaluation goes awry (Brandon 1998; Nesman, Batsche & Hernandez 2007). Alongside mandatory evaluation requirements and budget allocation, there are a variety of resources to support project teams with implementation evaluation (for example, BetterEvaluation n.d.; Chesterton & Cummings 2011; JISC n.d.; Oliver et al. 2002). Such resources are expansive and tend to be aimed at large projects, such as those that are usually externally funded and run for periods of 12 to 24 months. For a detailed overview of the international contexts for university funding of learning and teaching enhancements, see Huber and Harvey (2013).

But what of smaller projects with limited resources for both time and money? Current evaluation resources designed for large-scale projects can be seen as inappropriate, as they are too complex for small projects. For example, one evaluation toolkit developed as part of a project funded by the UK Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC n.d.) took 4.5 hours to complete. Whilst this was reasonable for the complex demands of evaluating large projects, it was considered to be ill-suited to smaller studies (Oliver et al. 2002). Similarly, findings have been reported about the educational-evaluation literature: "although an enormous body of literature around evaluation has been developed, teachers in the trenches trying to bring about reforms are mostly unfamiliar with this literature" (Hannah 1996, p. 412). Whilst resources and information on evaluation are available, they are not widely used. In a study of program-evaluation practitioners and evaluation theorists, the author found that "the gap between the common evaluator and the notions of evaluation practice put forth by academic theorists has yet to be bridged" (Christie 2003, p. 34).

At the same time, it must not be assumes that all smaller projects have similar evaluation needs (Huber & Harvey 2016b; Oliver et al. 2002; Stoner et al. 2012). However, the importance of evaluation and its role for improved project outcomes (leading to innovation and change), no matter the project size, cannot be underestimated. A precursor study to this one investigated whether the evaluation practices of small-scale project leaders were based on particular forms or approaches (Owen 2010). Findings indicated that only 27% of the participants used a named evaluation approach, and that these were based on prior experience (Huber & Harvey 2016a). Novices in the educational-evaluation space, who are often the recipients of small-scale project funding, did not align with any particular theory or framework.

The aim of this research study was to develop a practical evaluation-planning framework, accessible to a wide range of disciplinary scholars that would contribute to the improvement of the evaluation of learning and teaching innovations in higher education. The research question addressed by this study is "What is required to develop a framework to support the evaluation of small-scale internally funded learning and teaching projects?" This study is significant because findings can contribute to the improvement of the evaluation of small-scale learning and teaching innovations in higher education. Empirical evidence on the practices of evaluation scholars has been called for (Christie 2003; Rog 2015; Smith 1993), and this planning framework can contribute to the collection of such data.

This paper describes the development of a new evidence-based framework for evaluating small learning and teaching projects. The background section will situate this research within a wider study and summarise the previous findings. The methodology used in this study is introduced and methods used to develop and trial the framework are presented. The findings from this research are integrated with earlier findings and are discussed in the context of emerging evaluation practitioners in the higher-education sector.

Background

This paper describes the development of an evidence-based evaluation-planning framework designed for small, internally funded learning and teaching projects, through an action-research approach (Coghlan & Brannick 2010; McNiff 2001). The purpose of the framework is to help project teams develop a flexible evaluation plan that is relevant to their contextual needs. This study is premised on the assumption that a well-designed evaluation plan can lead to more-focused evaluation outcomes, which in turn can make a significant contribution to the adoption (or not) of any learning and teaching innovations.

The evaluation-planning framework introduced here is informed by leading evaluative scholars and is predominantly based on the work of Paul Chesterton and Rick Cummings (2011), who in turn applied the work of Owen (2006) to develop resources for the Australian Office for Learning & Teaching (OLT) and their predecessor, the Australian Learning & Teaching Council (ALTC). Their resources were designed to support grant applicants in their evaluation of large (upwards of $50,000), government-funded learning and teaching projects in higher education. The framework described in this paper also incorporates the importance of developing "Key Evaluation Questions" that can be adequately answered (Datta 1997); the use of evaluation (Patton 1994); stakeholder engagement (Stufflebeam 2011); identification of evaluation-study audiences (Saunders 2000); identification of the level of generalisability for further application of evaluation

findings (Scriven 1991); and the determination of the scope of success factors and, conversely, the points at which a project may need to be stopped (Phillips, McNaught & Kennedy 2012). The focus for this new framework is small learning and teaching projects. The framework is given the name SPELT (small-project evaluation in learning and teaching).

The design of the SPELT framework was the outcome of a series of precursor studies and phases (Figure 1). The first study investigated the evaluative practice of a cohort of learning and teaching grant holders (n=15) in a higher-education context (Huber & Harvey 2016a). Thematic analysis was used to analyse the transcripts of interviews with 15 project leaders. This resulted in four key themes being drawn from the data: how evaluation is conceptualised, particularly the overlap, even conflation, between evaluation and research; capability building within the sector; resourcing in terms of time and money; and the role of an action-oriented approach to evaluation. It was found that whilst a number of resources existed to support the evaluation of learning and teaching projects, they were rarely known or used. Furthermore, the study found that evaluation theory and the practice of project evaluation were misaligned, and that this relationship can be inhibited by a project leader's perception of evaluation.

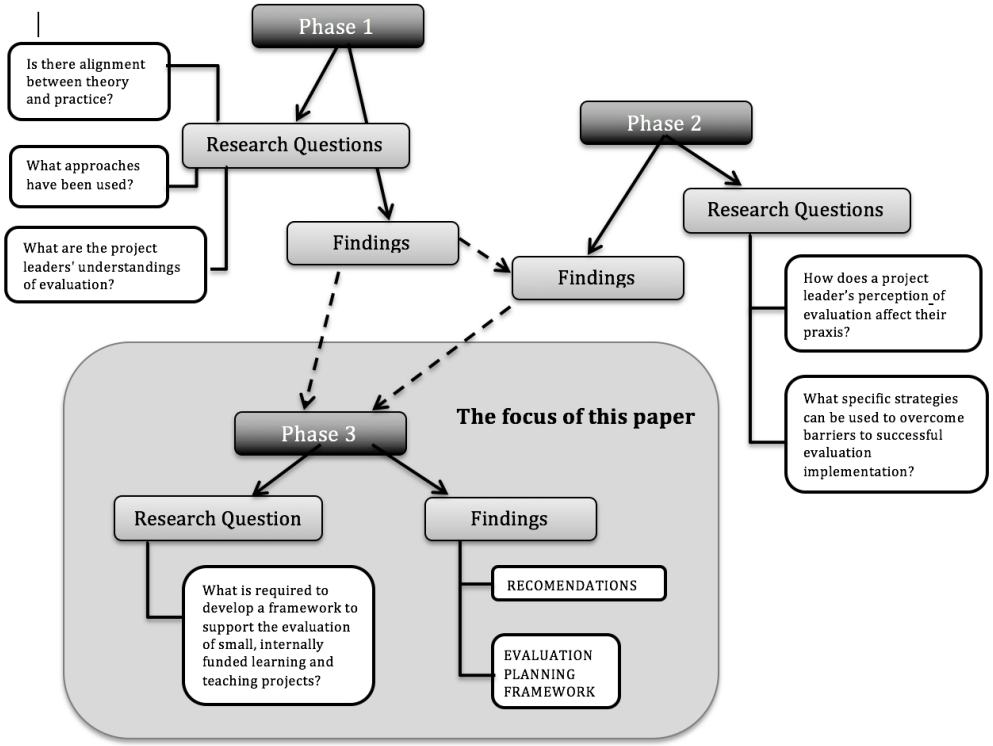

Figure 1. The focus of this paper, embedded within the three phases of this research study [there is an odd little mark in the box that starts "How does a project leader's perception"]

A second study built on the findings of the first phase and used case-study methodology to investigate three internally funded learning and teaching projects in greater depth (Figure 1). These case examples provided the data for analysis using an explanatory approach, and the

projects shared a focus on curriculum design in arts and humanities disciplines at an Australian university. The researchers acted in the role of participant-as-observer (Babchuk 1962) within each project and investigated the contextual factors that influenced its evaluation practices (Huber & Harvey 2016b). This second phase found that factors influencing the praxis of evaluation include timeframe; previous experience of leading a project; and the mandating (or lack thereof) of evaluation from the projects' grant-funding body. Informed by the research findings, four strategies to enhance the adoption of systematic evaluation in small learning and teaching projects were discussed: making evaluation-support mechanisms more explicit; the development of an evaluation community of practice with other grant recipients that could enable engagement in collaborative reflection; a requirement for grant applicants to identify how their project builds on previous work; and the need for a flexible framework for evaluation planning. Figure 1 gives a visual overview of the three study phases.

During the first two phases prior to this study, the interview protocols used in both data-collection stages were developed and refined based on a synthesis of seminal research by evaluation scholars (Huber & Harvey 2016a; 2016b). Using the protocols, findings and feedback from the participants in these first two phases, 12 questions were sequenced into a proposed framework. Findings from the previous phases of the study indicated a lack of clarity and some misconceptions about how and what to evaluate, so the framework became a series of reflective prompts to aid the novice evaluator. Table 1 summarises the questions that form the proposed framework, along with the corresponding influential literature/evaluation scholar.

Table 1. 12-Step evaluation-planning framework

Step	Question	Literature
1.	What is the purpose and scope of the evaluation?	Chesterton & Cummings (2011); Saunders (2000); Stufflebeam (2011)
2.	How will the information from the evaluation be used?	Owen (2006); Patton (1994); Saunders (2000); Scriven (1991)
3.	Who are the stakeholders of the project and the evaluation?	Chesterton & Cummings (2011); Stufflebeam (2011)
4.	Who is the study audience for the evaluation results?	Saunders (2000)
5. 5.1	What are the Key Evaluation Questions? Can they be answered adequately?	Chesterton & Cummings (2011) Datta (1997)
6.	What data and evidence will be collected?	Saunders (2000)
7.	How will the data be analysed?	Chesterton & Cummings (2011); Owen (2006)
8.	What are the criteria for judgement?	Chesterton & Cummings (2011); Owen (2006)
9.	Who will review the evaluation plan?	Chesterton & Cummings (2011); Saunders (2000); Scriven (1991)
10.	What amount of generalisability will there likely be?	Scriven (1991)
11.	What reporting strategies will be used?	Chesterton & Cummings (2011); Stufflebeam (2011)

12.	What are the critical success factors? Is there an exit strategy in place?	Phillips, McNaught & Kennedy (2012)

This current study (Figure 1, Phase 3) builds on the first and second phases, and begins with the research question "What is required to develop a framework to support the evaluation of small, internally funded learning and teaching projects?" This paper reports on the development of the framework.

Methodology

The process of developing this new SPELT framework was framed within an action-research approach (Coghlan & Brannick 2010; McNiff 2001). Action research "seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern…" (Reason & Bradbury 2001 p. 1). In this case, the issue was the practice of evaluation in small learning and teaching projects, and the practical solution was a framework that would be flexible and useable. Action research also requires iterative cycles of action, observation, evaluation and redesign (Wadsworth 2011). This phase of the study investigates the design and development of a framework through two iterative cycles of reflection on practice, feedback and redesign. The ultimate output of this research was to produce an evaluation-planning framework that could support educators on the journey to improving their learning and teaching practice.

Action research was enacted through the two sessions with learning and teaching project-evaluation practitioners. Participants reflected on their practice by interacting with the framework. The component parts of this session are shown in Figure 2. Then the researcher redesigned the framework based on feedback and observations. Each cycle will now be described.

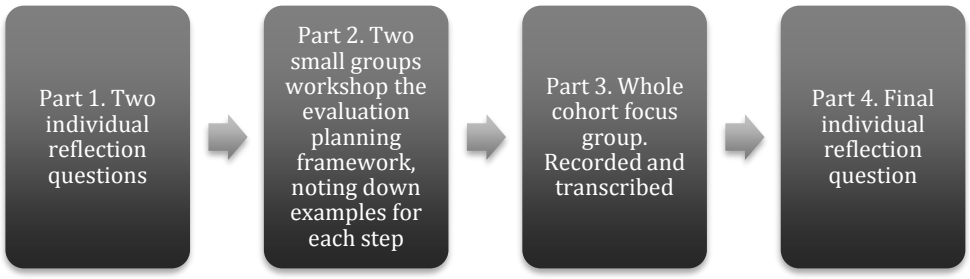

Figure 2. Component parts of the focus-group session

Action-research cycle one

Participants

The initial 12-step evaluation-planning framework (Table 1) was piloted with a group of academics from one Australian metropolitan university. For the first round of investigations, invitations to participate in the study were sent to all staff who had received an internal learning

and teaching grant during the year of the study (n=33). In this invitation it was explained that the purpose of the framework was to assist participants with their small-scale project. Seven staff responded and became the focus-group participants. These participants included two males and five females from the following disciplines: journalism, communications, education, accounting, civil engineering, environmental engineering and nursing. Two of the participants had also previously received large-scale, externally funded learning and teaching grants; one was new to learning and teaching grants; and others had received numerous small-scale, internally funded learning and teaching grants.

Method

The framework was interrogated by the participants through a hands-on workshop and focus group (combined). This one-hour session was broken into four parts (Figure 2). The first part required participants to individually reflect on their evaluative practice in small-scale learning and teaching projects and write down their answers to two questions: 1. What does evaluation mean to you? And 2. How do you feel about evaluation? This was done to focus the group on the topic and offer them time for critical self-reflection (Mezirow 1998). In the second part of the session (Figure 2, part 2), participants worked in two small groups to workshop the evaluation-planning framework (Table 1). This was considered the "act" part of the action research cycle. They were encouraged to write notes and examples against each of the steps. The human-ethics consent received for this project authorised the collection of participant's written notes. These notes have since been used to develop a supporting resource for staff that contains specific, practical and authentic examples to illustrate each of the steps in the evaluation-planning framework. Appendix A contains an excerpt.

Table 2. Focus-group questions

1.	What do you like about this framework (what works well)?
2.	What parts of this framework do you think need improvement?
3.	Is there anything missing from this framework?
4.	Is the framework practical? If not, what is needed to make it more so?
5.	Could you start to evaluate your project once you have completed the framework template?

The third part of the session (Figure 2, part 3) involved a focus group to unpack the feedback on the evaluation-planning framework from the participants. This contributed to the "evaluate" part of the action-research cycle. The focus-group questions answered in the group context are listed in Table 2. The focus-group component was recorded and transcribed as verbatim text. In the final part of this session (Figure 2, part 4), participants were asked to answer a third question (individually): "Has your perception of evaluation changed during this session?" This data was collected as an evaluative measure for the planning framework.

Data analysis

All data from the session (reflective answers, examples, transcripts) were triangulated with relevant evaluative and scholarly learning and teaching literature to form a rich, robust and comprehensive validated account is (Cohen & Crabtree 2006). Together with the findings from the first and second phases of the wider study (Figure 1), this data informed the development of a second iteration of the evaluation-planning framework (Table 3). This iteration contained only six steps; the reasons for this will be described in the following results and discussion section.

Action-research cycle two

Participants

This second iteration of the evaluation-planning framework was trialled with a new cohort of participants. Invitations were sent to all learning and teaching grant awardees at one large, metropolitan university (as previously but without the participants from cycle 1). Seven people responded: six females and one male from the following disciplines: international studies, biological sciences, mathematics, civil engineering, project management and education. Four of the participants had previously received both large-scale, externally funded and small-scale, internally funded learning and teaching grants; two were new to the learning and teaching grant space.

Method

The session for the second cohort was run exactly as the first cycle, except that this time the evaluation-planning framework only contained six steps (Table 3). The examples, which had been provided by the participants of the first cycle (Figure 2, part 2) and which described authentic applications of each step of the evaluation-planning framework (Table 1), were also used in the second cycle. This helped to situate the framework and questions in the context of higher education (O'Neill 1995). Participants were also reminded that the focus of this planning framework was on small-scale learning and teaching projects.

Data analysis

The transcribed data was again triangulated with the evaluation literature and the findings from phase 1 of the wider study (that whilst a number of resources exist to support evaluation of learning and teaching projects, they are rarely known or used); findings from phase 2 of the wider study (that the project leaders' conception and experience of evaluation influences their praxis); and findings from the first cycle cohort, who had used the 12-step framework (as detailed in the following section). This was to determine whether any further changes were required to produce the final evaluation-planning framework.

Findings and discussion

In this section comments from the participants in the two focus groups are used to highlight key findings. The participants are designated according to their focus group (cycle 1 or 2) and their discipline (letters). The section uses the process of "enfolding" (Eisenhardt 1989), whereby the evaluation literature is used to interpret, explain and substantiate the relevance of the participants' comments. Participants' comments are also used throughout the following section to highlight and explain research findings.

Cycle one: 12-step framework

The participants in the first focus group were introduced to the 12-step evaluation-planning framework (Table 1) through instructor-led discussion of each of the steps. Participants were encouraged to ask questions and share their practice with relevant examples. There was a general openness to talking about evaluation and a positive atmosphere in the room during the discussion, particularly when talking about their own projects. This aligns with a previous study of small-project grant holders (Huber & Harvey 2016a) that indicated that whilst time and energy is invested in a project, there are often few (and sometimes no) feedback opportunities, either formal

or informal, focusing on evaluation. This is an important requirement if the focus is to encourage change or to go one step further and support the leadership of change in learning and teaching (Ramsden et al. 2007).

Previous findings have indicated that learning and teaching evaluation practitioners, particularly those new to small-grant projects, require support (Huber & Harvey 2016a). Distributed leadership is an approach that could potentially provide this support. In this approach, leadership capacity can be developed in an environment of respectful collaboration, with the aim of sustaining improvements in teaching and learning (Jones et al. 2014). A key feature of distributed leadership is that everyone involved in a process (for example, the project team members) has their strengths acknowledged and, where appropriate, leads some part of the project. This aligns with a participatory action-research approach, and with the recommendation from phase 1 of the wider study that participatory action research could be investigated further for small learning and teaching projects. Traditional approaches to evaluation are not participatory. There is a perception that evaluators need to be experts, and that they are external to the project, often remaining aloof and merely observing, then judging, the project. Some project leaders feel pressure from such external evaluation activities and this leads to a negative perception of evaluation (Huber & Harvey 2016a). This is not a good fit for the academy. Exemplary evaluation activities could be modelled through a distributed-leadership approach, thereby acting as an evaluation-support mechanism.

The cohort of grant recipients participating in the first-cycle session were able to share their experiences, and therefore "relive" the process. The notion of learning through a community of practice is not new (Wenger 1998). The interaction between focus group participants suggests the need for an ongoing conversation around evaluation and findings from innovative projects as can happen in a community of practice. This aligns with findings from phase 1 (Huber & Harvey 2016a) and phase 2 (Huber & Harvey 2016b) that practitioners felt they were working in a vacuum, and had no one with whom to share their thoughts and questions. Such a supportive environment can provide the foundations needed to facilitate scholarly practice, the encouragement needed for organisational leadership to develop at a local level and the opportunity to develop peer networks.

The workshop component of the session (Figure 2, part 2) began with the researcher (who was also the presenter) introducing the purpose of the evaluation-planning framework. It was observed that the participants required further clarity when discussing the synergies between research and evaluation. As a result, it was noted that a diagram might have been useful to help clarify this relationship, and that one would be used for the second-cycle focus group (Figure 3). This diagram, which was developed based on the work of John Owen (2006), scaffolded the participants' understanding of evaluation and research synergies. One example is highlighted in this comment:

> *I think step 6 [Table 1] needs to be really clear too, the thing about what data and evidence will be collected. I immediately thought of the data about student outcomes rather than when you said "data for when you evaluate the project", and that's a totally different perspective. And that wasn't quite clear until you said that (Participant 1A).*

Other opinions emerged around the confusion between evaluation and project reporting; for example "There is some confusion in the small teaching and learning grants about what is an

evaluation and what is a report" (Participant 1N). It would therefore be useful to clarify meanings in the final evaluation-planning framework, through participant's reflection on their own context (Botcheva, Shih & Huffman 2009; Schwandt 2014). Similar findings were noted in phase 1 of the wider study. A number of concepts were conflated, such as the distinction between research, evaluation and project outcomes; and the difference between stakeholders and study audiences required clarification (Huber & Harvey 2016a).

In general, there was a group-wide agreement on the value of evaluation (based on the responses to the pre-session question "What does evaluation mean to you?", and a willingness to embrace it in their projects. However, this could be due to the self-nomination of participants, and may not necessarily be true of all grant-holders. In phase 1 of the wider study, some of the project leaders were hesitant to embrace evaluation, and in fact stated that if evaluation had been mandated they wouldn't have applied for the grant money, as they would have felt that they were being "watched" (Huber & Harvey 2016a).

Two participants felt overwhelmed by the framework because it was too long. This led to comments from members of the group regarding "having to" complete it. For example, one said, "The motivation to do it properly depends on whether it is useful for yourself. If it's just ticking off boxes for someone else, then the evaluation will be cursory and not very interesting or useful" (Participant 1C). This aligns with findings from phase 1 of the wider study and from the literature, in that many of the complex evaluation approaches reported are not suitable to smaller-scale projects (Stoner et al. 2012).

Some participants commented on the time it would take to complete the planning framework, and said that if this was mandated it would discourage them from doing evaluation. This aligns with findings from the literature that lack of time was one reason why projects often did not complete evaluation requirements (Harris, Jones & Coutts 2010; Huber & Harvey 2013; Ryan, Chandler & Samuels 2007). The SPELT framework developed in this study is intended as a resource to help grant holders and project leaders formulate their evaluation plan in as time-efficient way as possible.

Another thread from the discussion around mandating evaluation led to this comment: "I just forget to do the evaluation and no one says anything" (Participant 1J). Phase 1 of the wider study showed that when funding bodies did not follow up regarding final project reports, the evaluation tended to fall by the wayside; this led to a recommendation from that phase of the study that grant awardees receive sufficient support to understand the "how" and "what" of evaluation. (Huber & Harvey 2016a).

One participant felt that more explanation was required as to how evaluation results could be useful: "So this [framework] doesn't instil in me a sense of why I should complete it – I don't get a sense that it will help the project outcomes or how its useful for future research" (Participant 1J). Inclusion with the framework of some background text that describes the usefulness of both formative and summative evaluation (Scriven 1996) could address this point. Another participant reflected on their previous experiences working on projects in a non-academic environment where they would ask questions at the end of the project about what worked well and what didn't. However, they felt that this wouldn't translate to an academic scenario because "that was more about individual skill development and project management skills than the actual project itself" (Participant 1A). However, such learning from a project is indeed valuable if skills can be applied again more effectively to the next iteration or a different project (Preskill & Torres 2000). In fact, evaluation itself "involves ongoing learning" (Rog 2015, p. 235).

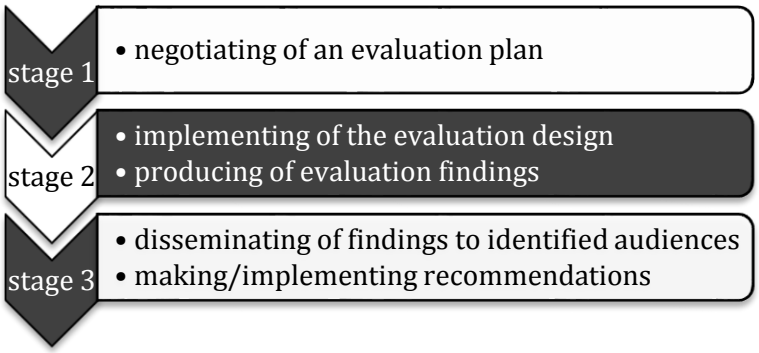

Figure 3. Three stages of the project evaluation cycle (adapted from John Owen 2006)

One participant (1N) stated that evaluation would be perceived as more useful if it were aligned closely with the grant-application questions. This highlights the importance of perception, a topic that will be discussed in the next section. It also suggests the importance of context and how it can influence decision-making (Tourmen 2009). It has been shown that beginners (in evaluative practice) find it difficult to cope with the complexity of evaluative activity, such as not being able to control contextual factors, waiting for stakeholder's decisions and compromising (Tourmen 2009). A structured framework to assist with an evaluation's planning could be highly beneficial for those new to evaluation. Defining the purpose of the evaluation (Step 1, Table 1) is imperative to successfully deliver outcomes that others may set (Bocheva, Shih & Huffman 2009; Saunders, 2000; Stufflebeam, 2011) or perceive to be important.

Modifying the evaluation-planning framework

Based on the findings from the first cycle and from earlier phases of the wider study, a series of changes were made to the framework (the redesign phase of the action-research cycle). There existed a perception that it would take too long to complete a 12-step framework. Several steps were combined to reduce the number of steps from 12 to six. The main developmental changes are listed together with the rationale underpinning the need for each change.

- Conflation of the terms *stakeholders* and *study audiences* caused some confusion. Two steps (steps 2 and 3 of Table 1) were combined so that those unsure of the difference between these two terms could simply apply the one that would be relevant to their context (Table 3, step 2).
- Collection and analysis of data were combined into one step, as these activities are naturally grouped (Figure 3, stage 2).
- Participants agreed that the evaluations of their internally funded learning and teaching projects were small-scale and primarily used formatively for the benefit of the project team. In most cases their evaluation plans were not evaluated, and therefore step 9 (Table 1) was removed.
- Similarly, thoughts about the generalisability of the evaluation were not common in these evaluations; this step (Table 1, step 10) was also removed.
- Critical success factors and exit strategies were areas the participants felt would have been discussed in the grant application and therefore was unnecessary for the planning framework (removal of step 12).
- An extra item was added to step 6 (Table 3) to encourage users to reflect on how the dissemination strategies could help them. This was in response to participants' comments

about the need to close the quality-enhancement cycle and a similar finding from phase 1 of the wider study (Huber & Harvey 2016a).

Table 3. Six-step evaluation-planning framework

Step	Question
1.	What is the purpose and scope of the evaluation? Consider also how the information will be used.
2.	Who are the stakeholders of the project and of the evaluation?
3.	What are the Key Evaluation Questions?
4.	What data and evidence will be collected and how will it be analysed?
5.	What are the criteria for judgment?
6.	What dissemination strategies will be used and how will this help you?

Cycle two: Six-step framework

Participants in the second-cycle workshop were introduced to the modified (six-step) evaluation framework (Table 3) and given the opportunity to discuss it in pairs, adding examples from their own projects against each step where applicable (Figure 2, part 2). As in the first cycle, which used the 12-step framework, there was a general openness to talking about evaluation and a positive atmosphere in the room during the discussions, particularly when talking about their projects. Again there was a general understanding of the value of evaluation and a willingness to embrace it in their projects. The two participants who were new to evaluation, grants and projects contributed less to the discussions than the other participants. Nevertheless, throughout the session it was observed that they made notes and asked questions of their peers, further exemplifying the value and usefulness of a community of practice for learning, development and capacity-building in evaluation praxis. For example, some of the more experienced participants could answer questions posed by lesser experienced colleagues about terminology in the SPELT framework, such as "I found that I didn't quite understand what you meant by formative and summative…with regards to evaluation" (participant 2BS). And in response "I thought that the formative was things that inform you as you are doing the project. So you are doing a little bit of evaluation as you are going through anyway, and you are using the output of that before you complete the project" (participant 2S).

In this group, two of the experienced participants disagreed about the order of the first two questions in the planning framework. It is widely agreed that stakeholder involvement strongly influences how evaluation findings are used (Harris, Jones & Coutts 2010; Johnson et al. 2009). One participant believed that identifying the stakeholders must come first before deciding on the scope of the evaluation. I.e. step 2 before step 1.

> *Okay, taking a project that I've been on. The stakeholders came first. We looked at issues they faced and then, okay, so what outcomes are they expecting and how are we going to*

> *address them? So, very much, at least from my project point of view, it is the stakeholders who are driving the process (Participant 2M).*

However, another participant strongly disagreed.

> *I think I would leave the stakeholders where they are and I would leave the outcomes front and centre. I like the [framework]. I think it's really helpful to have up front and to be thinking about your whole evaluation at the beginning of the process. For me personally, I would be very outcome-focused and make sure I'm really clear on what my outcomes are prior to planning (Participant 2PM).*

This second participant's viewpoint aligns with the guidelines provided by Australian higher-education grant funders, the OLT (Chesterton & Cummings 2011) and leading evaluation scholars (for example, Alkin 2011; Owen 2006). Stoner et al. (2012) found that the purpose of evaluation must be established before the stakeholders are identified. However, the stakeholders can then help form the goals and attributes within a project to develop the evaluation framework.
This suggests the possibility of a flexible starting point for any evaluation framework, or an ability to be able to revisit steps according to individual requirements, contexts and stakeholder needs. The importance of flexibility to the success of an evaluation was also a main finding in a research study on participation (DeLuca, Poth & Searle 2009); the study concluded that evaluators must be explicit in how any participatory approach can meet the primary evaluation purpose whilst at the same time enhancing use.

A participant (2PM) commented that they felt another step was needed for the six-step planning framework regarding recommendations for the future. For example, users should consider how their evaluation results could inform future projects. This was a step that had been removed from the initial 12-step version of the framework in an effort to achieve a more parsimonious product. As a result of this feedback, it will be reinstated in the final iteration. To minimise the number of steps (and therefore the conception of time needed to complete the evaluation), this information will be incorporated within the dissemination stage (Table 3, step 6) as a reminder to think through future plans.

Participants in this second-cycle group all agreed that a reminder about the need for ethics approval for certain data-collection activities may be required at step 4, and made more explicit in step 6, rather than "how has this helped you?" "I'm not sure this should be an extra step or just an example but to collect some of the data and evidence, people who are new to evaluating might not know that you need ethics approval" (participant 2BSa). This was exemplified in a precursor phase of this study where the authors followed three projects through their engagement with project evaluation. One of those projects did not obtain ethics clearance and was thus limited in how they could disseminate findings (Huber & Harvey 2016b).

Regarding the dissemination of evaluation findings (Table 3, step 6), two participants (2IS and 2E) suggested the inclusion of people who undertake support roles in the institution, such as teaching and learning units and the library, both central and Faculty-based, so they can facilitate cross-disciplinary learning. "[The central unit] should be interested stakeholders to see what the outcomes of my project are for when they give advice to other people requesting grants" (participant 2IS). This also aligns with findings from the previous phase of the wider study (Huber

& Harvey 2016b). A community of practice was also mentioned not only as a means of dissemination but also as a valuable outcome in and of itself. "The outputs…. could also be communities of practice or different ways of getting practice sharing and engagement or ongoing change" (participant 2E). This reinforces earlier comments on the value of communities of practice for building evaluation capacity, another of the findings from phase 1.

The Theory of Change approach to evaluation is one way of investigating the progress of a particular project or intervention. This approach aims to "determine its intended outcomes, the activities it expects to implement to achieve those outcomes, and the contextual factors that may have an effect on implementation of activities and their potential to bring about desired outcomes" (Connell & Kubisch 1998). In this approach, information about the progress of an intervention can provide guidance not only that change is required but how and why certain activities can lead to improvement. This was raised during the focus group when the participants discussed the benefits of formative evaluation: "So you are doing a little bit of evaluation as you are going through anyway and you are using the output of that before you complete the project" (participant 2BS). Again, this aligns with the concept of evaluation for learning as put forth by Preskill and Torres (2000), who suggest that "when individuals participate in an evaluation process that is collaborative and guided by dialogue and reflection, learning occurs not only at the individual level but also at the team and organization levels" (p. 26).

Earlier phases of this study found that named evaluation approaches were rarely used (Huber & Harvey 2016a). This is not to say evaluation wasn't happening; rather, it may indicate that many practitioners in the area of small-grant projects were unaware of the different evaluation methods and approaches.

The final key learning from this second-cycle focus group was about the language used in the framework. One participant said, "I think it would be better to use the language of progress rather than achievement..... Progress is very valuable" (Participant 2PM). This is a concept endorsed by the evaluation scholar Wadsworth (2010) in her work on human inquiry for living systems, which suggests that the process of building research and evaluation into everyday actions can generate new knowledge in addition to facilitating learning through inquiry. Using such language also has the potential to develop a scholarly approach to learning and teaching.

Reflecting on lessons learned about designing an evaluation-planning framework

A number of pertinent recommendations emerged from the findings and discussion sections. When designing an evaluation-planning framework that aims to be practical and flexible for a range of applications in the higher-education sector, it is recommended to:

1. Include significant background information about the usefulness of an evaluation-planning framework to preface the use of the framework and situate it in the context of the institution. Exemplars can assist in this (O'Neill 1995).
2. Limit the number of steps/questions to reduce the perception of time needed to interact with the framework (Ryan, Chandler & Samuels 2007).
3. Include a set of reflective questions to situate each step and further clarify what is required (Botcheva, Shih & Huffman 2009; Rog 2012).

4. Offer users some pre-set options from which to choose, but also some open-ended options for them to add their own contexts.
5. Allow users some flexibility in which questions they would like to use in the framework, such that it is aligned with their context and grant-application or reporting requirements (DeLuca et al. 2009; Sheard & Markham 2005).
6. Use the language of progress rather than achievement, as smaller grants often use evaluation as a monitoring or development checkpoint (Connell & Kubisch 1998; Wadsworth 2010).

These lessons learned have been incorporated into the final SPELT framework (Table 4). The author invites colleagues to make use of the SPELT framework to validate and confirm its transferability to different contexts.

Table 4. The SPELT framework including example reflective prompts

Step	Action	Reflective prompts
1.	**Define** the purpose and scope	• What exactly are you evaluating? • Why is the evaluation being done? • Are you basing the evaluation on any particular method, framework or approach? Next consider the results from the evaluation. • How will the information be used? This may depend on the audience for the evaluation, so you may need to return to this question after completing step 2. Considering usage may also help narrow down the scope of the evaluation. • Who will evaluate this project? Are they suitably skilled? • What value will the evaluation process add to the project?
2.	**Identify** the stakeholders	• Are the stakeholders also part of the study audience? • Consider how competing interests should be prioritised.
3.	**Develop** key evaluation questions	• Are the questions summative or formative? • How many questions are reasonable?
4.	**Collect** and **analyse** data	• What are the most appropriate methods of data collection? • How will any ethical issues be addressed?
5.	**Define** measures of success	• Consider what it would take for the project to be deemed successful. For example, it may be that it produces and disseminates information about the intended outcomes. • What items are considered as failure points?
6.	**Report** or **disseminate** strategies and recommendations	• What are the functions of reporting? • Who will read the reports? • When will reporting take place? • What kinds of information will be included in evaluation reports?

		For example, the funding body may need information on how resources have been used; formative reporting could provide feedback to the project team on processes or design; and engaging stakeholders may be required for greater use of findings.

Limitations

Two limitations are noted regarding this study. First, it is situated in the Australian higher-education context, and the framework is designed for that context. However, higher-education sectors in other countries have similar funding systems supporting the development of learning and teaching innovations (Huber & Harvey 2013). Early iterations of the framework and the need for such a support mechanism have been trialled with a number of education and evaluation practitioners through presentations and focus groups. However, wider dissemination of the SPELT framework needs to take place to learn about transferability to the international sector.

The second limitation of this study is the number of iterations that occurred in the design of the SPELT framework. An open-access online version is currently being trialled and invites feedback from users. This data will be used to further refine the examples and use-cases for the framework.

Conclusion and next steps

The SPELT framework has been developed through three phases of research using primary data from learning and teaching practitioners in higher education. Combined with findings from the evaluation literature, a six-step approach to evaluation planning has been shown to be an appropriate approach in this study for small, internally funded learning and teaching projects. Such an approach offers a better fit for purpose than some of the more elaborate approaches and frameworks designed for projects with larger budgets. Further research is now needed to test the SPELT framework with a wider cohort of users, examine the longer-term gains and ensure that the six steps meet the evaluation needs of a diverse range of projects. In addition, the SPELT framework could be trialled with larger projects to evaluate its applicable range.

The research findings also show that if such an evaluation-planning framework is designed to be responsive to various contextual requirements, it could act as a potential instigator for reflective practice and leading innovative change in learning and teaching. Six recommendations have been made that underpin the design and implementation of the SPELT framework; they are strengthened by the literature and supporting comments from the participants in this testing phase.

It must be clarified, however, that a systematisation of evaluation criteria is not being suggested here, though this may be an area for future investigation to compare across projects.

This study has also shown that users want to save time if they have to complete evaluation activities. The next step in this study is to trial the use of the SPELT framework in an interactive electronic or online format, incorporating the recommendations above. The author has begun this process by developing an online version of the framework using form input, datasheets and some simple coding to trial its versatility and usefulness with an audience of internally funded learning and teaching grant holders in the higher-education sector.

Appendix A – An excerpt from a supporting resource for staff containing specific, practical and authentic examples to illustrate each of the steps in the evaluation planning framework

Step	Example (small, internally funded project)
1. What is the purpose and scope of the evaluation? Consider also how the information will be used.	Purpose: • Determine if stated objectives are achieved • Measure success of project/innovation • Document appropriate spending of funds/accountability • Measure impact Scope: • Used to seed a larger grant • Support for embedding intervention more widely • Shared with colleagues
2. Who are the stakeholders of the project and of the evaluation? Are they also part of the study audience?	Project: • Students (current and future) • Subject coordinators • Tutors in the subject • Faculty's Associate Dean Teaching & Learning • Colleagues at other institutions Evaluation: • Grant committee/funder • Colleagues
3. What are the key evaluation questions?	Formative: • What measures, if any, are being put in place to promote sustainability of the project's focus and outcomes? • What factors are helping and hindering in the achievement of the outcomes? Summative: • What lessons have been learned from this project and how might these be of assistance to other colleagues/institutions?
4. What data and evidence will be collected and how will it be analysed?	In a small project (team of one or two), this could consist of: • Observation/reflection data • Student evaluations of an intervention • Grades • Feedback from stakeholders and from peers Analysis: • Qualitative, through thematic coding of responses • Quantitative to show improvement
5. What are the criteria for judgment?	• Improved student feedback/satisfaction survey results • Improved grades • Student satisfaction with outcomes • Lower attrition rates • Access rates
6. What dissemination strategies will be used and how will this help you?	• Publications • Presentations • Running workshops for colleagues • Reports to grant body/management • Newsletter/blog articles • Critical friend

	Help: • Raise awareness of the intervention • Gain feedback for next stage/project

References

Alexander, S 1999. An evaluation of innovative projects involving communication and information technology in higher education. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 18(2), pp.173-183.

Alkin, M 2011. *Evaluation Essentials: From A-Z.* The Guildford Press, New York.

Babchuk, N 1962. The Role of the Researcher as Participant Observer and Participant-as-Observer in the Field Situation. *Human Organization*, 21(3), pp.225-228.

BetterEvaluation n.d. *Sharing information to improve Evaluation*. Viewed 14 May 2016 at http://betterevaluation.org.

Botcheva, L, Shih, J & Huffman, L 2009. Emphasizing Cultural Competence in Evaluation. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 30(2), pp.176-188.

Brandon, P 1998. A meta-evaluation of schools' methods for selecting site-managed projects. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 24(3), pp. 213-228.

Chesterton, P & Cummings, R 2011. ALTC Grants Scheme – Evaluating projects. Viewed 26 February 2015 at http://www.olt.gov.au/system/files/resources/Project_Evaluation_Resource.pdf.

Christie, C 2003. What Guides Evaluation? A Study of How Evaluation Practice Maps onto Evaluation Theory. *New Directions for Evaluation*, 2003(97), pp.7-36.

Clark, J & Hall, E 2008. Will the lessons be learned? Reflections on local authority evaluations and the use of research evidence. *Evidence & Policy*, 4(2), pp.255-68.

Coghlan, D & Brannick, T 2010. *Doing action research in your own organization* (3rd edn). SAGE, London.

Cohen, D & Crabtree, B 2006. Triangulation. *Qualitative Research Guidelines Project*. Viewed 20 November 2016 at http://www.qualres.org/HomeTria-3692.html.

Connell, J & Kubisch, A 1998. Applying a theory of change approach to the evaluation of comprehensive community initiatives: progress, prospects, and problems. *New approaches to evaluating community initiatives*, 2, pp.15-44.

Cronbach, L 1982. *Designing evaluations of educational and social programs*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

Datta, L 1997. A pragmatic basis for mixed-method designs. *New Directions for Evaluation*, 1997(74), pp.33-46.

DeLuca, C, Poth, C & Searle, M 2009. Evaluation for learning: A cross-case analysis of evaluator strategies. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 35(4), pp.121-129.

Eisenhardt, K 1989. 'Building theories from case study research', *The Academy of Management Review*, vol. 14, no. 4, pp. 532–550.

Gannaway, D, Hinton, T, Berry, B & Moore, K 2013. Cultivating change: disseminating innovation in higher education teaching and learning. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 50(4), pp.410-421.

Hannah, J 1996. What NSF Expects in Project Evaluations for Educational Innovations. *Journal of Geoscience Education*, 44(4), pp.412-416.

Harris, L, Jones, M & Coutts, S 2010. Partnerships and learning communities in work-integrated learning: designing a community services student placement program. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 29(5), pp.547-559.

Hinton, T 2014. The impact management planning and evaluation ladder (IMPEL). Viewed 8 December 2015 at http://www.latrobe.edu.au/ltlt/resource-library/sources/the-impact-management-planning-and-evaluation-ladder-impel.
Huber, E & Harvey, M 2013. Time to participate: Lessons from the literature for learning and teaching project evaluation in higher education. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 39(4), pp.240-249.
Huber, E & Harvey, M 2016a. Project evaluation in higher education: a study of contextual issues. *Evaluation Journal of Australasia*, 16(1), pp.19-37.
Huber, E & Harvey, M 2016b. An Analysis of Locally Funded Learning and Teaching Project Evaluation in Higher Education. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 30(5), pp.606-621.
JISC n.d. Project Management Guide. vViewed 15 May 2016 at
https://www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/project-management.
Johnson, K, Greenseid, L, Toal, S, King, J, Lawrenz, F & Volkov, B 2009. Research on Evaluation Use: A Review of the Empirical Literature From 1986 to 2005. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 30(3), pp.377-410.
Jones, S, Harvey, M, Lefoe, G & Ryland, K 2014. Synthesising theory and practice: Distributed leadership in higher education. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 42(5), pp.603-619.
McNiff, J 2001. *Action Research: Principles and practice* (2nd edn.). Routledge, London.
Mezirow, J 1998. On Critical Reflection. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 48(3), pp.185-198.
Nesman, T, Batsche, C & Hernandez, M 2007. Theory-based evaluation of a comprehensive Latino education initiative: An interactive evaluation approach. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 30(2007), pp.267-281.
Oliver, M, MacBean, J, Conole, G & Harvey, J 2002. Using a toolkit to support the evaluation of learning. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 18(2), pp.199-208.
O'Neill, T 1995. Implementation Frailties of Guba and Lincoln's Fourth Generation Evaluation Theory. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 21(1), pp.5-21.
Owen, J 2006. *Program evaluation. Forms and approaches* (3rd edn.), Allen and Unwin, Crows Nest.
Patton, M 1994. Developmental evaluation. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 15(3), pp.311-319.
Phillips, R, McNaught, C & Kennedy, G 2012. *Evaluating E-learning: Guiding Research and Practice*. Routledge, New York.
Preskill, H & Torres, R 2000. The Learning Dimension of Evaluation Use. *New Directions for Evaluation*, 2000(88), pp.25-37.
Ramsden, P, Prosser, M, Trigwell, K & Martin, E 2007. University teachers' experiences of academic leadership and their approaches to teaching. *Learning and Instruction*, 17(2), pp.14-155.
Reason, P & Bradbury, H (eds.) 2001. *Handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice*. Sage Publications, London.
Rog, D 2012. When background becomes foreground: Toward context-sensitive evaluation practice. *New Directions for Evaluation*, 2012(135), pp.25-40.
Rog, D 2015. Infusing Theory Into Practice, Practice Into Theory: Small Wins and Big Gains for Evaluation. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 36(2), pp.223-238.
Ryan, K, Chandler, M & Samuels, M 2007. What should school-based evaluation look like? *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 33(3-4), pp.197-212.
Saunders, M 2000. Beginning an Evaluation with RUFDATA: Theorizing a Practical Approach to Evaluation Planning. *Evaluation*, 6(1), pp.7-21.
Schwandt, T 2014. On the Mutually Informing Relationship Between Practice and Theory in Evaluation. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 35(2), pp.231-236.
Scriven, M 1991. *Evaluation thesaurus*. Sage Publications, Newbury Park, CA.

Scriven, M 1996. Types of evaluation and types of evaluator. *Evaluation Practice*, 17(2), pp.151-161.

Sheard, J & Markham, S 2005. Web-based learning environments: developing a framework for evaluation. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 30(4), pp.353-368.

Smeal, G, Southwell, D & Locke, R-A 2011. Learning and teaching from the edge to centre stage: Critical factors in embedding sustainable university-wide engagement in external awards and grants funding initiatives. In *Research and Development in Higher Education*, Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc, Radisson Resort, Gold Coast, Australia, 297 -307.

Smith, N 1993. Improving Evaluation Theory Through The Empirical Study of Evaluation Practice. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 14(3), pp.237-242.

Stoner, J, Meaden, H, Angell, M & Daczewitz, M 2012. Evaluation of the Parent-implemented Communication Strategies (PiCS) project using the Multiattribute Utility (MAU) approach. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 24(1), pp.57-73.

Stufflebeam, D 2011. Meta-evaluation. *Journal of MultiDisciplinary Evaluation*, 7(15), pp.99-158.

Tourmen, C 2009. Evaluators' Decision Making: The Relationship Between Theory, Practice, and Experience. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 30(1), pp.7-30.

Wadsworth, Y 2010. *Building in Research and Evaluation: Human inquiry for living systems*. Action Research Press and Allen & Unwin, Sydney.

Wadsworth, Y 2011, *Do It Yourself Social Research* (3rd edn.). Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest.

Wenger, E 1998. *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Worthern, B & Sanders, J 2011. Content Specialization and Educational Evaluation: A Necessary Marriage. *Journal of MultiDisciplinary Evaluation*, 7(15), pp.272-295.