

IMPACT

SUMMER INSTITUTE



EVALUATING TOGETHER:
Expanding Thinking
and Strengthening Practice

Informal Data: Real Insights

Prepared by:

HcA
Harry Cummings and
Associates



Funded by:



- **Harry Cummings and Associates (HCA)**
 - HCA: Evaluation/planning firm since 1997 based in Guelph, ON
 - Over 200 consulting projects in Canada/international
 - Dr. Harry Cummings, PhD, RPP, Director of HCA & President of the Canadian Evaluation Society
 - David Lane, Consultant, HCA
- **Participant introductions**
 - Name
 - Organization
 - Role/title within organization

WORKSHOP GOALS

1. Build capacity and awareness of participants around the approaches and inclusion of informal data in monitoring and evaluation practice.
2. Assist participants in understanding how to gather, validate and incorporate informal data into their work and to use them to contribute to evidence-based findings and decision-making.

WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES

- To understand how “informal” data and data collection relates to more “formal” approaches
- To understand when and why informal approaches are beneficial and appropriate
- To understand a variety of approaches and key sources of informal data
- To understand the key data quality, ethical and methodological issues associated with informal data collection
- To understand the differing needs and capacities of stakeholders and research participants
- To understand where informal data fits in the evaluation context
- To understand approaches to analysing informal data and how it can be triangulated and validated with other data sources

- **Quantitative and qualitative in nature**
- **Systematically and purposefully collected to provide evidence for pre-determined questions**
- **Traditional mixed-method data sources:**
 - Literature (academic and grey literature)
 - Key informant interviews
 - Survey/questionnaires
 - Focus group discussions
 - Program monitoring and information management systems

INFORMAL DATA SOURCES

- Typically qualitative in nature (often can be quantified)
- Unplanned, often emergent, from sources that may be rooted in spontaneity or experience (empirical/phenomenological)
- Possible informal data sources:
 - Participant observation
 - Journaling
 - Photography
 - Unstructured discussions/meetings (lunches, walks, site visits)
 - Traditional knowledge
 - Alternative secondary data (media, social media, blogs)
 - Informal written communication (emails, chat discussion, mobile communication)

STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES

- **Strengths:**

- Open inquiry, unexpected outcomes (Michael Quinn Patton)
- Accessible in a variety of low capacity contexts
- Can validate evidence collected from other sources
- Can contribute meaning and context to findings

- **Challenges:**

- Inclusive of a high degree of subjectivity & possible biases
- Sometimes difficult to validate with other evidence
- Interpretation may rely upon assumptions
- Inherently unpredictable

- **Reliability – the extent to which data can be replicated**
 - Stability
 - Internal reliability
 - Inter-observer consistency
- **Validity – the extent to which the data is truly measuring (or describing) the phenomenon of interest**
 - Face validity
 - Concurrent validity
 - Construct validity
 - Convergent validity

* Source: Bryman, A. & Teevan, J. (2005). *Social Research Methods*. Oxford University Press

BREAKOUT DISCUSSION

- Please review the sample(s) of informal data and discuss in your group
- Consider the following questions:
 - What do you find particularly relevant/useful in this sample?
 - How might to test the reliability and/or validity of this data?



Coffee break

- Informed consent
- Confidentiality/anonymity
- Risks to participants
- Tri-Council Policy Statement on 'Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans' – three core principles:
 - Respect for Persons
 - Concern for Welfare
 - Justice



- **Conflict of interest**
 - Stakeholder stands to personally benefit from a specific outcome (usually financially)
- **Lack of knowledge/awareness**
 - Education and/or experience makes stakeholder unable to speak with depth/accuracy
- **Social or political pressure**
 - Fear and/or political interests drive the stakeholder to present selective and/or manipulated information
- **Competing agendas**
 - Reliability of data is undermined by stakeholders with differing views and interests

- Please review the Case Study and discuss in your group
- Consider the following questions:
 - In this context, what are some of the key social, political, environmental factors at play?
 - What are some of the informal data sources you might consider accessing when looking at this case?

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1. Engage program staff and partners early in the evaluation process to discuss and agree on practical approaches , performance indicators and data collection methods.
2. Take the time to compile and 'mine' all available reports / documents / case files for evidence of outcomes .
3. Allow / plan for informal meetings with youth and service providers as a first step in gaining their confidence and trust... be an observer / participant in their activities... 'walk in their shoes' and see where the conversation goes.



Photo: Don Murray, CIRQINIQ Summer Camp, 2013

- Extensive use of observation
- Broad use of informal discussion and discovery exploration
- Secondary documents (i.e. instructor visit notes)
- Comprehensive review of Social Media (i.e. Facebook, YouTube)
- Snowball sampling
- Emergent design



Photo: Kativik Regional Government

- **Pre-planned documentation vs. retrospective review**
- **Field reports**
 - Dated journals, open ended site visit templates
- **Archived communications**
 - Meeting minutes, electronic correspondence, social media posts, public promotional/ communications materials
- **Photographs**
 - Informed consent, confidentiality/anonymity and intellectual property procedures must be considered
- **Media/social media**

FORMALIZING THE INFORMAL

- **Building informal (unstructured) data collection into your design**
 - Participant observation
 - Field journaling
 - Photo documentation
 - Review of informal documents
 - Open inquiry
- **Reflecting and incorporating emergent informal sources into your evaluation**
 - Snowball sampling
 - Discussions
 - Observations
 - Social media

- **Data cleaning/quality assurance**
 - Reviewing and formatting data into a format that protects data integrity, while collating it into a format that is digestible and sortable
- **Preparing a sortable spreadsheet/file system**
 - Input data into a program (i.e. Excel) in a fashion that can be sorted, by name, date, theme, etc.
 - Develop a filing system that will allow you to search and identify relevant data in an efficient fashion

CONTENT ANALYSIS/CODING

- **Data may be analyzed using standard quantitative/qualitative data analysis techniques**
- **Coding:** transforming your data into a format that can be sorted and analyzed (usually by categorizing data by particular themes/characteristics of interest)
- **Content analysis:** the identification and/or quantification of words, ideas and concepts from a text document
- **Identify most relevant and/or recurrent themes:**
 - If a single significant finding is identified, it may be used as an ‘impact story’ or a ‘mini case study’ to exemplify program or contextual realities
 - If a recurrent theme emerges from informal data, it can be quantified or summarized and reported (particularly if corroborated from various sources)

- **Informal data are most meaningful when they are reinforced and validated by multiple data sources**
- **Recurrent themes/codes identified in informal data will provide the greatest base of evidence for your findings if they can also be identified and corroborated by other sources, such as:**
 - Academic/grey literature
 - Secondary data
 - Expert testimony
 - A diversity of program stakeholders



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