EXPLORE YOUR UNIVERSE
COMMUNITY, PARTNERSHIP AND CO-CREATION

Evaluating your programme is essential as it's the only way to assess how effective it's being. This guide aims to help you collect the information you need and then use it to improve your programme.

UK Association for Science and Discovery Centres

Evaluation is simply a learning journey, and all participants should be part of this.

Evaluating our work can be seen as a bureaucratic tick box exercise, required to ensure we are accountable for the outcomes of a project when writing reports. Whilst honest accountability is an important goal of evaluation, good evaluation should be embedded at all stages of the programme and should help us do our jobs better, more effectively and impactfully. Good evaluation can also ensure we are being equitable, that wellbeing is accounted for and that expectations of participants are explored and met.

Enabling all stakeholders to take part in the evaluation processes in an open and transparent process is the key to embedding the learning process for all participants. It reduces the risk that participants become subjects of someone else's observation and research or are 'left hanging' at the end of a project without suitable feedback or understanding of their participation.

So the first step is to think about who should be involved in the evaluation and learning process. And the next step is to find out how we make a start.

A strategic, long-term approach to setting up evaluation frameworks can be really useful. We often make evaluation frameworks as part of reporting to a funder. So those frameworks are often based on a funder's objectives. Evaluations can also be piecemeal, and quite different from one project to the next. Instead, what about designing your own evaluation frameworks, based on a long term view of what you want to know. Ask yourself:

- What are your 3-5 year strategic goals as an organisation in relation to engagement?
- What are your longer-term objectives?
- Are there consistent lessons or questions you can ask of everything you do?
- How can you include different funders' objectives into your framework when you need to for specific evaluations?

Approaching evaluation in a case-by-case way means there can be a lack of continuity of findings. Each project is an opportunity to build up a coherent picture over a longer period of time.

Make sure you have clear aims and objectives for your project. This will set the basis for your evaluation. You will want to clarify these – perhaps with a simple table – at the beginning of your work, and include your community partner or participants. Discussing this at the beginning ensures that the project concept and planning is actually meeting your original aims and equally meeting the aims of your partners.

It can be a very useful process to lay out your plan as a Logic Model or a Theory of Change. In other words, what are you hoping to achieve through your work and what, as a result, might you measure. This document will set out a clear definition of your aims, objectives and outcomes/outputs that you can refer back to.

Be prepared for things to change, evolve and develop – especially where the relationship with the community partner is new and/or exploratory. It is worth ensuring you capture and communicate these changes for your evaluation, it is often the unexpected outcomes that provide greatest learning for project holders. Keep processes iterative and stay honest and open about changes. For example 'You told us this last time, so this time we have made these changes. What do you think?'

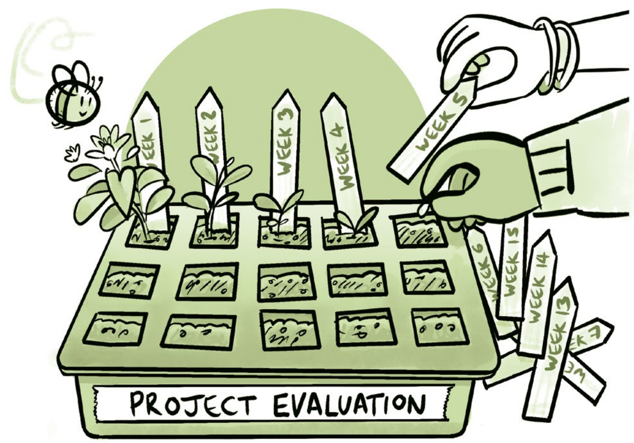
Evaluation is not just about accounting for your work, but also helping you do your job better and giving the time and space to reflect on your work and practice during your project. Without evaluation there is no way to either prove or improve your practice.

LITTLE & OFTEN

It can be helpful to think about evaluation as a learning journey and making-sense of your work, rather than just a requirement – something to be done "little and often" rather than just at the end of a project.

Part of this is making sure practitioners have the time and space to reflect on their work after delivery both independently and, where possible, with partners. This reflective practice helps support the expertise of the practitioners and also makes accounting at the end of the project much easier.

Keep asking yourself 'who should be involved in the evaluation process?' to embed the learning across all parties.



Evaluation should no longer be about numbers alone. A large number of attendees through the door does not capture any understanding about who participates, the depth of the engagement and what they take home. Consider measuring how your project has supported participant's motivation, feelings of achievement, belonging or confidence (among others).

There are many frameworks for evaluation, but STFC have produced a simple toolkit for projects and programmes working with 'Wonder' audiences. The toolkit rearranges outputs and GLOs into three areas:

Contextual – What's your starting point? (such as personal characteristics or a pre-existing relationship to science) (this data should be collected before the interaction)

Reactive – What did you think of it? (gathering immediate reactions following an engagement including do they feel welcome, did they feel inspired?) (this data should be collected following the interaction)

Reflective – What did you do next? (this takes time to emerge and looks at more substantial change in interaction, identity or engagement with science) (this data should ideally be collected before and then and then again after a period of time following the interaction).

Try to steer clear of biased questions. "How much did you enjoy your visit today"? Or "How much do you love science?". These questions, obviously, can't give you such useful information. We already know people want to give positive responses, especially if you are there asking the questions, so think about how to frame your questions really carefully.

Here are some examples of questions you might want to ask

Contextual questions you may wish to capture might include:

- Ages, gender (ensure this is not binary), postcode (IMD)
- School information (e.g. %FSM) or details of community partner
- A pre-existing relationship to science may be captured by the question "Someone in my family is really into science or works in science" (Yes/No/Don't Know).

Reactive questions you may wish to capture might include:

- Did you feel you were able to join in and ask questions? (e.g. 5 point scale)
- Do you want to find out more about something you have learned?
- Did you feel comfortable and at home in this science centre/space?

Reflective questions you may wish to capture might include:

- Do you feel science has relevance to your daily life?
- Do you think science can have a positive impact on our future?
- Are you more or less interested in studying science or working in science?

You may also want to consider asking **open questions** to avoid leading participants or being too subject focussed, for example "thinking about today..."

- How do you feel?
- What have you learned?
- What would you change?

HOW TO CAPTURE THE MAGIC

While working with community partners, it is difficult to measure all changes and meaningful experiences in numbers alone. Many of the longest lasting impacts are too subtle or awkward to translate into quantitative data (for example, the trust developing over the course of a project between partners). This is where qualitative approaches and case studies can help capture these stories.

Keeping a reflective journal is a great tool for qualitative and quantitative data. It should be completed after every session and can help capture the "magic" key moments, the stories of engagements, the unexpected outcomes and the journey you have taken over time, as well as demographic/monitoring data (e.g. numbers of attendees, other key statistics) and the formative evaluation (what worked well, what didn't work well, what should be changed for the next time).

Both your own experience and that of your partners should be a valued part of the evaluation picture. This can be effectively captured using interviews or completing reflection journals together. It is often your partner who can spot early signs of challenge or draw attention to 'lightbulb' or 'meerkat' moments or other indicators of impact that would otherwise be missed. Including this voice in your evaluation uncovers a wealth of impact and understanding from a different but critically important perspective.

No one tool for the Job.

Evaluation is about building a broad picture that can tell a story of impact and learning. There is no single evaluative tool which is perfect by itself, so a good rule of thumb is to collect and triangulate three different approaches to help capture this bigger picture (e.g. reflective journals, practitioner surveys and case-studies).

Stories of change

Particularly important in complex or innovative programmes, look for narratives and stories of change. These are powerful not just for us to understand how we have impacted on change, but for sharing more widely.

Stories of change are used to explore and demonstrate the change that has occurred as a result of a project or programme. They are often used in development interventions to supplement quantitative indicators of success and communicate changes in knowledge, behaviours, attitudes and practice that cannot easily be captured in quantitative metrics. They can be combined with more simplistic quantitative indicators to build up a picture of progress towards the overall projects goals.

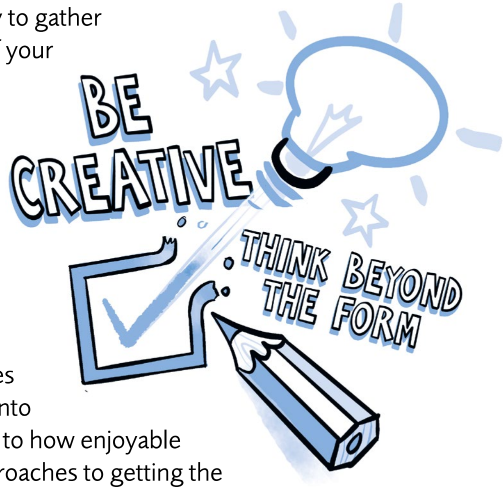
Stories of change can bring the project to life for external audiences as they may be more able to identify with the results of the programme through the use of real life examples. Stories of change will not usually attempt to illustrate the overall results of the intervention but often one well-chosen example of success can lead to a wider understanding of the projects overall results or the potential future results. It therefore equips you with something accessible to convey to others the value of the programme and provides funders with a tool by which to communicate to a wider audience the value of the work they are funding.

Considerations when collecting data

Build in plenty of time to do this properly, not at the last minute when everyone is jumping on the minibus home!

Think about how to collect data but in ways that will make the data meaningful to you. A key concern is capturing overly positive responses because people are in the middle of having fun and want to be kind. How might you manage to collect the data you need without making people feel obliged to be positive? And when you sit down to look at the data you've collected, try to keep in mind whether there might be any biases in play?

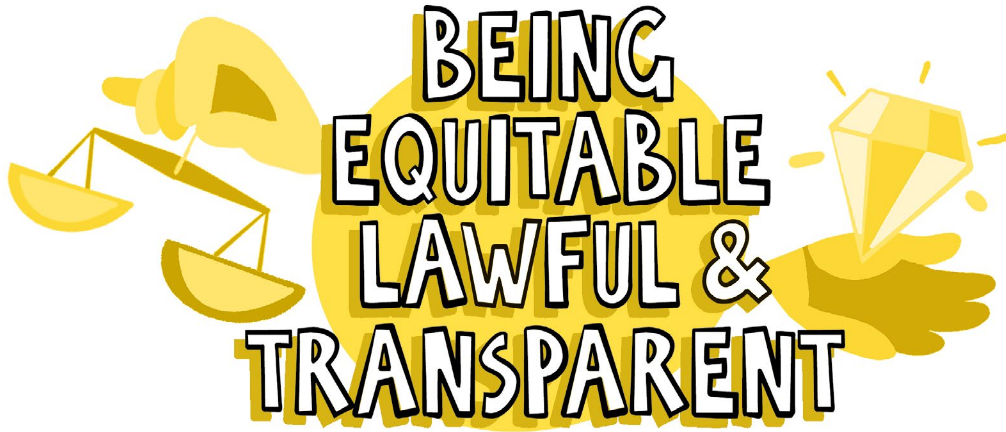
If you do use a questionnaire or survey to gather this data, be sure it meets the needs of your participants in terms of language, wording and levels of literacy. You also don't have to rely on a post-event survey form to gather this feedback. Questions could be done during ticket signups, as interviews or observations, or embedded into the experience itself. There are many creative and playful methods that can "gamify" certain questions into activities (e.g. participants returning lab-coats onto coloured hooks based on their answer to how enjoyable they found the session). Different approaches to getting the answers you seek can help reduce the need for long questionnaires. Visit: inclusion.sciencecentres.org.uk for some inspiration on different tools and ideas from across the sector and beyond.



Gathering quality reflections takes time. Depending on the age and nature of the group this could be done by having a short discussion, exploration first or by asking everyone to think for 5 minutes before writing anything down. Either way, it is worth encouraging them to take their time.

Another consideration is whether you want to connect results to an individual (for tracking impact or change) and when you are happy to elicit anonymous results.

If you are truly looking for iterative and honest responses, particularly to make tweaks and changes to activities, then consider inclusive techniques that support anonymous answers (such as mentimeter or asking for anonymous comments on post-it notes). This helps gather more of the seldom-heard voices from your participants and also helps reduce the temptation of participants to please the facilitator by only being positive – a particular risk when you have created positive relationships!



It is important to commit to core principles of ethical research, relating to responsibility, accountability, data protection and values of independent research. We have ethical responsibilities to ensure:

We are inclusive, respecting different interests, values and perspectives

We uphold the privacy, autonomy and dignity of individuals, groups and communities that we work with

We conduct all our research with transparency and integrity, employing the most appropriate methods for the research purpose.

We always aim to maximise benefit and minimise harm in conducting and disseminating any project or research.

Collecting data ethically

From a moral standpoint, people are providing us with information that allows us access to aspects of their lives. This is a responsibility that is given to us and we must be respectful of that trust and ensure we don't use it in any way that could cause harm.

Always think 'Fair, Lawful and Transparent' and three more golden words – "Voluntary Informed Consent." Ensure all participants understand what they are being asked, and how their data is used and don't feel coerced into participating or providing their data. Make sure they know they can withdraw for any reason and at any time, and making sure they are informed, in suitably accessible language and approach, is a critical part of informing all participants of these rights.

Remember, data collection for learning evaluations can often overlap with, replace or simply feel like market research. So much market research has exploitative connotations for people. The more transparency & co-development you can build into your data generating & analysis processes, the less your partners and participants will feel like you are extracting data for your own nefarious purposes!

At all points, including evaluation, it is good practice to avoid doing something "to" communities rather than working with them (see partnership working) and this is also the case with evaluation. Make sure you involve community partners in conversations about what success looks like to them within the project, and this should inform your evaluation approach.

This should be balanced with the fact that many community partners can be very busy delivering services, so you should be mindful and realistic around the administrative burden of any evaluation approach with the partners, and open conversation and expectation settings throughout the project is vital.

Don't forget community partners have expertise and experience in working with their participants and stakeholders, and therefore will likely have evaluation tools and approaches which may be particularly suited and at least already familiar to the participants. They will also be able to raise issues around accessibility (e.g. language) and safeguarding around sensitive or intrusive questions. If it is possible to embed in these approaches, and other evaluation needs of the community partners, you are more likely to get better responses. This may require a conversation with funders to match and streamline evaluation approaches as best as possible.

Sharing your practice

You goal may be to publish your outcomes, share practice at relevant conferences or meetings, produce and disseminate digital or physical resources, or write a case study for our Inclusion Website. Celebrating your success, advocating for great practice, sharing your challenges and you may, or may not have overcome them, is a crucial part and an important responsibility of running any programme of work.

Your community partners may wish to have their achievements or challenges credited or highlighted in your dissemination. Recognition is an important part of the control of the research. But in naming organisations, does this have any implications for the anonymity of your data subjects? This is a discussion to have with your partner to allow for suitable credits and recognition, while respecting privacy of data.