

Empowerment Evaluation Cross-culturally: Guiding Theories, Principles, and Concepts in Spain and the United States

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David Fetterman and José M. Díaz-Puente use an empowerment evaluation in rural Spain and an American medical school to highlight a few of the fundamental empowerment evaluation theories and principles. The focus of the article, however, is on the use of empowerment evaluation concepts that appear to apply cross-culturally, such as: critical friends, cycles of reflection and action, culture of evidence, community of learners, and reflective practitioner.

The professional practice of evaluation has been gaining a growing worldwide recognition (Díaz-Puente, Cazorla, and Dorrego, 2007) and an increasing influence to foster change processes, capacity building and learning (Kirkhart, 2000). In this context empowerment evaluation has become a global phenomenon. It has been used in: Australia, Brazil, Canada, Ethiopia, Finland, Israel, Japan, Mexico, Nepal, New Zealand, South Africa, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. It has been successfully applied in many settings, ranging from corporations such as Hewlett Packard to townships in South Africa. The approach has been used in many types of settings, including public schools, higher education, Native American reservations, as well as environmental protection, substance abuse prevention, and tobacco prevention programs. The definition of empowerment evaluation is simple: the use of evaluation concepts, techniques, and findings to foster improvement and self-determination. It is aimed at increasing the probability of achieving program or curricular success by (1) providing people with tools for assessing the planning, implementation, and self-evaluation of their programs, and 2) mainstreaming evaluation as part of their planning and management (Fetterman and Wandersman, 2005)

Empowerment evaluation differs from traditional evaluation in four significant areas: 1) builds capacity: community members, program participants and staff members, as well as relevant faculty and students learn to assess their own performance; 2) local

control: community members and program participants and staff are responsible for conducting the evaluation (assisted, rather than led by an evaluation expert); 3) knowledge is valued and used: evaluation data is requested, instead of gathering dust; and 4) continual feedback and improvement are the norm: data are used to continually inform decision making and improve performance.

Theories & Principles

Empowerment evaluation is guided by specific theories, principles, concepts, and steps (Fetterman, 2001; Fetterman and Wandersman, 2005). The most important theories include: process use and theories of action and use.

According to the theory of process use: the more that people engage in the act of conducting their own evaluations the more likely it is that they will find the results credible and act on the recommendations. The reason is because they own them. This enhances knowledge utilization.

The theory of action is the espoused theory of the organization or group of people. It is what they say they are all about. This is compared with the theory of use or what people actually do in practice. Often the theory of action and use are not in alignment. Fundamentally, empowerment evaluation is designed to build feedback loops that help people align what they say they are doing or hope to do with what they are actually doing in practice.

These theories work in conjunction with 10 specific principles of empowerment evaluation. The empowerment evaluation principles are:

1. Improvement
2. Community ownership
3. Inclusion
4. Democratic participation
5. Social justice
6. Community knowledge
7. Evidence-based strategies
8. Capacity building
9. Organizational learning

10. Accountability

According to Fetterman (2005):

These principles guide every part of empowerment evaluation, from conceptualization to implementation. The principles of empowerment evaluation serve as a lens to focus an evaluation. The principles of inclusion, for example, recommends erring on the side of including rather than excluding members of the community, even though fiscal and scheduling constraints might suggest otherwise. The capacity building principle reminds the evaluator to provide community members with the opportunity to collect their own data, even though it might initially be faster and easier for the evaluator to collect the same information. The accountability principle guides community members to hold one another accountable. It also situates the evaluation with the context of external requirements. The community is accountable for reaching specific standards or delivering specific results, products, and/or outcomes (p. 2).

Concepts

Empowerment evaluation is also guided by key concepts including: critical friends, cycles of reflection and action, culture of evidence, community of learners, and reflective practitioner.¹ A critical friend is an evaluator who believes in the purpose of the program, but is critical and analytical. They pose questions diplomatically to ensure rigor and honesty, because they want the program to be more effective and accomplish its objectives. Empowerment evaluations are conducted by program staff members, participants, and/or community members. An empowerment evaluator is a critical friend helping to facilitate the process, rather than an external expert controlling it.

Cycles of reflection and action consist of the process of using evaluation data to think about program practices and then using the data to inform decision making, e.g. implementing new strategies, eliminating ineffective ones, and so on. The concept emphasizes the cyclical nature of the process, rather than a unilinear approach. Data are continually fed into the decision-making system with the understanding that the program is dynamic, not static, and will require continual feedback as the program changes and evolves (and periodically stabilizes). Empowerment evaluation is successful when it is

institutionalized and becomes a normal part of the planning and management of the program, rather than a separate and parasitic entity operating in a “parallel universe.” Once institutionalized the cycle of reflection and action is complete because it creates a continual routinized organizational feedback loop. A culture of evidence is created by asking people why they believe what they believe. They are asked for evidence or documentation at every stage, so that it becomes normal and expected to have data to support one’s opinions and views.

Empowerment evaluation facilitates an existing community of learners and cultivates new ones.² Empowerment evaluation is driven by the group, by design. The group learns from each other, serving as their own peer review group, critical friend, resource, and norming mechanism. A community of learners is reinforcing, relying on group peer pressure. The group has values held in common and hold each other accountable concerning progress toward stated goals. A community of learners also helps focus the group and keep it on track. Finally, empowerment evaluations produce and then rely on reflective practitioners. Community members learn to use data to inform their decisions and actions concerning their own daily activities. This produces a self-aware and self-actualized individual who has the capacity to apply this world view to all aspects of their life.

Case Examples: Spain and the United States

We highlight two empowerment evaluation examples to demonstrate how empowerment evaluation concepts are transferrable cross-culturally. The first example is a project in rural Spain. The second is in Stanford University’s School of Medicine in the United States.

Spain

The *Universidad Politécnica de Madrid* received support from the *Servicio de Desarrollo Rural del Gobierno Regional de Madrid* (Rural Development Service of the Regional Government of Madrid) to conduct three rural development program evaluations. The programs were created under the European initiative called LEADER. It was designed to foster endogenous rural development through the creation of local partnerships.

U.S.

The School of Medicine at Stanford University was about to undergo an accreditation review, required for accreditation. Evaluation is often viewed as the heart of an accreditation review, consequently a Division of Evaluation was created¹. The division adopted an empowerment evaluation approach to guide the school and the accreditation effort.

Most Appropriate Approach

We valued both internal and external evaluations. We also thought that external evaluation would be easier and more fruitful in the future if we were able to build-in local evaluation capacity. The evaluation literature describes the efficiency of participatory approaches to build evaluation capacity. All participatory approaches share some concepts. However, they do differ. For example, empowerment evaluation is designed to facilitate learning and change and build local evaluation capacity. Empowerment evaluation is designed to contribute to sustainability, because it puts evaluation tools in the hands of community members – enabling them to continue to monitor and assess their performance. For this reason we thought empowerment evaluation represented the most appropriate approach given the needs of rural communities in Spain and the medical school in the United States. In addition, the effectiveness of empowerment evaluation has already been established in the literature. (See Díaz-Puente, Cazorla, and Carmenado, 2009 and Díaz-Puente, Yagüe, Afonso, 2008, concerning work in rural Spain; Fetterman, 2009 and Fetterman, Deitz, and Gesundheit, 2010, concerning evaluation practice in Stanford University’s School of Medicine; and Fetterman, 2001 and Fetterman and Wandersman, concerning additional projects.)

Empowerment evaluation and traditional external evaluation are not mutually exclusive. In the Spanish case example, the European Commission and the Madrid Government required an external evaluation orchestrated by an external evaluator. In the American model, the accreditation committee conducted its own external review of the program, orchestrated by a team of external evaluators. Empowerment evaluation

¹ Professor Fetterman was recruited to create and manage the School of Medicine’s Division of Evaluation.

functions effectively and productively in this climate. It can assume primary responsibility for internal assessment and contribute to external and summative assessments. In essence, empowerment evaluation plays a leading role in internal evaluations. Community members, program staff and participants assume responsibility for the evaluation including implementing monitoring tools. They also assume a collaborative role and some responsibility in the summative evaluations.

Spain

LEADER Groups. Our evaluations focused on the empowerment of the three groups of people that undertook the daily management of the programs; through these target groups it was easier to reach a larger part of the rural communities and expand the evaluation culture among them. This was done through the participation of the stakeholders in several focus groups centered on: agriculture, cattle-breeding, rural tourism, arts and crafts or marketing of local products. Each group focused on issues relevant to these sectors and applied the three step model in empowerment evaluation: 1) mission, 2) taking stock, and 3) planning for the future (Fetterman, 2001).

U.S.

Faculty, Students & Administrators. Our evaluations focused on the empowerment of faculty, students, and administrators in the School of Medicine. This was the critical composition of key stakeholders, required to “change the culture” and implement change. This was accomplished by participation of members of these groups in course assessment, curriculum committee, division of evaluation, and faculty senate meetings. The focus was on the medical school curriculum including: core pre-clinical courses, clerkships, scholarly concentrations, and physical examination task force efforts.

Three Step Model

The mission step consisted of eliciting value statements about their dream or ultimate goals. Taking stock had two parts: 1) prioritizing the list of activities stakeholders were engaged in; and 2) rating how well they were doing in each area. After engaging in a dialogue about the ratings and providing evidence for the ratings, the group developed

their own plans for the future. That step consisted of developing: 1) goals (associated with the activities evaluated); 2) strategies to accomplish the goals; and 3) credible evidence to document that the strategies were implemented and successful.

We valued the simplicity of the model. It allowed us to rapidly become familiar with the programs and the curriculum. It also helped stakeholders to see evaluation as something non-threatening and approachable. The stakeholders saw the model as “something useful and easy to implement.” We recognized that it was a useful way to begin our capacity building. In Spain, the stakeholders explained: “the mission step served to (help us) reach a consensus on where local strategies should be focused”. In the United States, the stakeholders stated that: “the mission (step) helped use establish a consensus concerning our values for the program.” The taking stock exercise created a baseline and focused the evaluation effort on the most important issues for the stakeholders. The planning for the future exercise helped the community come to a consensus concerning where they wanted to go.

Following the Guiding Concepts

These two case examples, in rural Spain and in a medical school in the United States, are used to highlight a few of the fundamental empowerment evaluation concepts, such as: critical friends, cycles of reflection and action, culture of evidence, community of learners, and reflective practitioner. The power of these concepts to guide an evaluation in very different settings attests to empowerment evaluation’s capacity to function effectively cross-culturally.

Cycles of Reflection and Action

Empowerment evaluation is a process of collecting and analyzing data or reflecting on the data, and then using the data to inform decision making. In our two examples, people collected the data, thought about it, and then acted on it to improve their programs.

Spain. The cycles of reflection were evidenced in the use of monitoring systems. The management teams showed an increasing interest in the use of evaluation tools for monitoring the programs. The monitoring tools in place usually consisted of an

information system (a data base) and a self-evaluation system (a systematic surveillance of an indicator system). We had to assume a leading role in designing the monitoring tools when we started working with the LEADER groups, in 1996. However, eventually the management teams began to take more of an initiative – especially in the design of the indicator system for self-evaluation in the mid-term evaluation of 1998. They came to rely on these tools to think about and assess program progress.

The participants in the evaluation process (especially the LEADER management teams) had to apply the new knowledge they acquired, concerning evaluation concepts and techniques, in continuous “cycles of reflection and action” that characterize the empowerment evaluation approach.

The LEADER groups’ internal evaluation process also reflected the cycles of reflection and action. Evaluation findings played an important role in decision-making. The data were often used to make changes concerning things that did not work. Using the recommendations made in the evaluation reports, the local development strategies were reoriented. The LEADER partnerships acknowledged: “evaluation activities were useful in improving their programs, accomplishing their rural development goals, and being more professional in managing their rural development programs”. This was a significant evaluation contribution to the rural communities.

U.S. The cycles of reflection were also manifest in a monitoring system. The Division of Evaluation in the School of Medicine collected student assessments of courses and feed the results back to faculty and administration. The faculty took on an increasing interest in the data once they recognized it was being provided on a routine basis, accurately, and in a user-friendly format. In addition, they recognized that the data produced from this monitoring system was being shared in the spirit of constructive criticism. It was not designed “to get somebody.”

The individual faculty members joined with students and administrators to reflect on the data (the course ratings). The aim was on improvement and collaboratively they worked to interpret the data and remove unintentional redundancies and implement more effective teaching practices.

These new practices, were, in turn were assessed as well to determine the effectiveness of the new curricular innovations – relying on the course evaluation monitoring system. This was a significant contribution to the curricular development and improvement process, which in the past was fragmented and left to individual faculty members often operating in a curricular vacuum and without data to ensure some measure of educational accountability.

Critical Friends

We worked with the groups in both communities (Spanish and American) to help them conduct their internal evaluations, not as experts, but as people who believed in their work with an eye toward helping them design meaningful assessments of their work and building their evaluation capacity. When we helped the groups design their monitoring tools, they both decided to use a 3 steps model.

Spain. They used the 3 step model to conduct some focus groups and to follow up on the implemented development strategies to determine how they were doing, focusing on the most important rural sectors of each territory. We assisted some of these focus groups, which were led by members of the LEADER groups. We also provided suggestions to help them make the process more rigorous. Our contribution also included advocacy: recommending that the group remain inclusive (concerning invitations to their meetings). We also advocated for the use of evidence to determine program effectiveness, including collecting information, analyzing the data, and designing strategies with the rural communities.

As critical friends we also recommended adaptations to the three steps model to ensure that they valued stakeholder contributions. These suggestions facilitated engagement and encouraged participation. Specifically, we want to make sure high status individuals became more aware of the power or status differential in the group. In some instances, individuals with less status were less likely to contradict higher status members. They followed our advice and began meetings by soliciting the participation of the least senior stakeholders before asking higher ranking members to participate. The

discussions became more productive and generated more discussion and engagement across groups.

U.S. The Director of Evaluation in the School of Medicine, assumed the role of the critical friend. He ensured that the course evaluation data was available on a timely basis in order to facilitate discussion and dialogue about the curriculum. He also convened timely meetings (shortly after each course) to provide stakeholders with a forum and opportunity to engage in a dialogue about the data on a routine basis. The Director also ensured that the climate remained constructive, rather than punitive, and encouraged participation from all levels in the pre-clinical portion of the curriculum (typically the first two years of the medical school curriculum), including proctors, instructors, clinicians, students, core faculty, and administrators. Similarly, students, residents, faculty, and administrators were encouraged to participate in the process of self-reflection and action on the clerkship level of the curriculum (typically, the last two years of medical school).

Culture of Evidence

The process of asking people to provide documentation to support their opinions contributed to a culture of evidence. Everyone was expected to provide supporting documentation for their views as the process unfolded.

Spain. The findings and recommendations documented in the evaluation and monitoring reports greatly contributed to the generation of this culture. They provided evidence and arguments to: justify a change in beliefs and opinions among the rural communities regarding the common good (agreed upon problems and desired outcomes), select a course of action between alternative solutions, and improve the local development programs. The reports provided an authoritative source that local leaders and the participants in the evaluation process relied upon to try to persuade others, support previously held positions, or replace ineffective strategies in the LEADER programs of their local areas.

The groups relied on the evidence in the reports to reorient their local strategies, change funding streams and strategies (in one case shifting the funds from a losing strategy to rural tourism to have a greater impact on development), and improve the management of the programs and their coherence with other national or regional policies as applied in their rural areas.

The summative evaluations conducted between 2000 and 2007 were more useful and reliable because the management teams had already become accustomed to collecting and analyzing evaluation data. It is also noteworthy that the regional government of Madrid reported an increase in the quality of the annual monitoring reports made by the management teams of the rural development programs.

U.S. Similar to the experience in Spain, the evaluation reports provided faculty, students, and administrators with evidence instead of opinion or conjecture to make decisions. Faculty could disagree with each other and the student views, but the student ratings provided a baseline in which to engage in arguments. In addition, faculty recognized at minimum that the student perception that there was a problem required attention because it meant that the information was not being delivered or received as intended.

Faculty were also asked to assess their own programs and courses. They were then asked to explain and provide evidence for their ratings. The Director of Evaluation convened mid-course focus groups to ascertain student views of a course (while it was still possible to make mid-course corrections). Students were asked to rate aspects of the course and provide evidence for their ratings or assessments. This process of holding people accountable for their views helped to cultivate a culture of evidence.

Community of Learners

Empowerment evaluation depends on people functioning in groups, rather than individual entrepreneurs. The process of working together to solve common problems, relying on data, and helping each other, builds a community dedicated to learning from the information they collect about their activities.

Spain. Evaluation was originally seen by stakeholders as an imposition by the European Commission and a necessary step for obtaining financial resources. When evaluation penetrated their activities, the evaluation process was viewed as an instrument that could help them attain their development goals; an instrument that could help them in their common efforts to work and improve their territories.

Eventually, the empowerment of stakeholders at the lowest possible level was carried out through the interactions between the LEADER management teams and the rest of the rural population. The efficacy of these interactions was evidenced by the increasing number of people who began to understand the importance of evaluation. The LEADER teams reported that each time more people were available to participate in the evaluation activities (interviews, focus groups, etc.). An initial, clear and pragmatic, though inclusive, delimitation of the stakeholders empowering themselves was important (in our case the management teams). This core group was critical to facilitate large-scale empowerment among the rural population.

The focus group data in this case example supports this view. As a local leader reported: “this kind of meeting, focused on the different sectors of rural activity, provided a very rich view of the territories where all participants learned, and all participants provided information and solutions to some problems. But the best solutions were found by combining the insights of the different stakeholders.” Solutions concerning low participation of women in programs, unemployment, or environmental issues, emerged from the group or collaborative discussions.

U.S. Evaluation, before empowerment evaluation was employed, was dependent upon the good will and time of individual faculty. Problems with courses would continue year after year. There was no systematic mechanism for collecting and circulating the data. In addition, there was no community to engage the data.

After empowerment evaluation was adopted, learning communities emerged on both the pre-clinical and clerkship levels. On the pre-clinical or course level, students, faculty, and administrators met routinely to discuss the data (course assessments) and the decisions to implement new curricular practices (in an effort to address identified problems). Course directors valued these opportunities stating: “these (meetings) are the

first time we have had to come together and meaningfully share what we are learning about what works and does not work.” Similarly, on the clerkship level, clerkship directors stated: “this is the kind of data we need to make collective decisions to improve clerkships across the School.”

Reflective Practitioner

One of the goals of empowerment evaluation is for every participating member to reflect and think about their work on a daily basis. The use of data to inform decision making is internalized on a group and individual basis. The reflective practitioner is continually attempting to improve practice by relying on data.

Spain. One of the members of the LEADER groups epitomized this role. He reflected on the summative evaluation findings and produced a document not only to help his own programs, but as a tool to disseminate “best practices” and help other programs. The publication had the added benefit of enhancing the rural communities and regional government’s appreciation of the LEADER programs.

U.S. The director of obstetrics clerkships in the medical school used empowerment evaluation to reflect on her own practices orienting incoming clerkship students. She recognized her own biases and ineffective practices (which were reflected in students evaluations) and completely re-designed the her orientation and approach to working with incoming students. This reflective practice was also reflected in improved student ratings for her specific role in teaching (as well as the evaluation of the clerkship as a whole.)

System-wide Benefits

In both the Spanish and American case examples, system-wide benefits were documented.

Spain. One of their most important challenges faced by an increasingly decentralized system is that local governments often possess limited staff resources and

lack management experience. Empowerment evaluation is responsive to these system issues. The approach enables, it builds capacity. The result was a stronger capacity to develop local initiatives, transform them into real projects, and increase the fund-raising and private investment in the development strategies.

At the regional level, a better consideration of the LEADER management teams and their work was evidenced. The regional authorities of Madrid were not used to the kind of decentralization characterized by the LEADER program. Initially they mistrusted these new local organizations. At present, the LEADER groups have gained the confidence of these authorities. The authorities are supporting the continued development of LEADER programs. In addition, the regional authorities of Madrid have required the collaboration of LEADER groups in the management of different measures and programs that these authorities are carrying out in their rural areas, (such as the regional rural development program and the programs for the diversification of the rural economies, both co-financed by the European Union). This is a significant measure of confidence in the LEADER groups and their work.

U.S. Similar to the experience in Spain, students, faculty, and administrators in the medical school were willing to tackle large-scale issues and problems that they avoided or neglected in the past, in part because they could see that their collective action could make a difference. The time they devoted to this task was viewed a productive time because they could see the fruits of their labour. System-wide issues, such as problems associated with the training of students to conduct physical examinations were systematically assessed. The issue was thoroughly studied and various action plans were implemented. In addition, innovations to improve student performance in this area were systematically collected and reviewed on a routine basis.

Some Lessons in Empowering People

We learned some lessons about evaluation as we applied empowerment evaluation in both of these settings – cross-culturally. In empowerment evaluations, people invest their time and energy to help their communities development and grow. They deserve to be treated with compassion and respect. They contribute to these efforts because they want

to use their talents creatively. Participation in empowerment evaluations adds value to their lives. People need to be challenged, continually learning from their environment. People also need to feel like they are contributing to larger problems and serving basic human needs. People need to feel valued.

Empowerment evaluation cultivates an environment of profound respect coupled with industrious productivity. It also helps people maximize their potential. Empowerment evaluation, in Spain and the U.S., tapped into community talents and passions. It provided a structure or framework for action. Empowerment evaluation helped people become immersed in their work. This kind of involvement inspires people to turn work into “a labor of love.”

Communication – primarily listening and speaking skills – is without question, one of the most important empowerment evaluation techniques. Most people think they know how to listen because they think they are doing it all the time. However, people typically only listen within their own frame of reference or world view. Empowerment evaluators use an empathic listening skill: conducted within the community members’ frame of reference. This means adopting a nonthreatening or judgmental perspective. We found that it was necessary for community members (in both Spanish and American communities) to feel like they were heard before launching into problem solving. Failure to adopt this world view results in a proliferation of turf issues and defensive communications. Empowerment evaluators recognize that there is more than one perspective of reality and more than one way to interpret reality. The challenge of empowerment evaluation lies in creating a shared vision that values as many of the differing viewpoints in the community as possible.

Conclusion

Empowerment evaluation has proved to be a valid and useful approach in the areas of endogenous rural development in the EU and an American medical school. It shifts the focus of evaluation, from an imposition to a necessity. It celebrates the strength of collaborations. Empowerment evaluation helped evaluators become more conscious of their responsibility to build evaluation capacity. Empowerment evaluation also helped

cement stakeholders commitment to improving the lives of the people living and working in their own communities³.

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¹ These concepts are influenced by traditional organizational development and transformation theorists including Argyris and Schon (1978) and Senge (1994), as well as evaluators associated with organizational learning (Preskill and Torres, 1999).

² This is critical to an accreditation effort because accrediting agencies are looking for wide-spread faculty, student, and staff member involvement in curricular development, review, and refinement.

³ In Spain, this case study illustrates how an empowerment evaluation approach to community objectives can be combined with EU standards of accountability, and how it is possible to foster improvement in the rural communities of the EU while responding to the requirements and information needs of the different public authorities that shape the multi-level governance in the EU at the same time. In the American example, this case study illustrates how an empowerment evaluation approach to medical school objectives can be combined with accreditation standards of accountability.