

Program Evaluation and Case Study¹

Saville Kushner

This entry looks at the convergence of case study methodology and program evaluation. An early insight of some educational evaluation theorists was of the convergence of case study and program evaluation – the fusion of method with purpose. Program evaluation and case study came to be mutually-bracketed. In the educational evaluation field 'Responsive', 'Democratic', 'Illuminative' methodologies were developed in parallel with case study methods - the same authors contributing freely to both fields.

Case study and program evaluation

Typically, a program under evaluation covers too many sites to allow for the real-time observation of context that has emerged as essential to apprehend the texture and the experience of the innovatory program under investigation and to explain its workings. Context emerged early in the development of program evaluation as a key determinant of the success or failure of innovation. Multiple sites imply multiple contexts and a qualitative sampling strategy is required. The subsequent qualitative study of cases came quickly to yield high quality explanatory data, especially of how an innovatory program interacts with context to generate effects. Evaluators found an instrument that invited the direct observation of innovation. House in a 1979 article reviewing the previous 10 year's experience in program evaluation, noted a tendency to locate evaluations within a broader analysis of social change. Each program evaluation was a case study of social innovation. Some people called evaluators the 'story-tellers of innovation'.

The intimacy of case study along with its capacity to reveal contingencies (interrelationships) and to garner direct testimony in the form of judgemental observations of events also means that evaluators are able to conduct direct observation of change processes – or at least to ask people about change they are exposed to. Evaluation conducted in 'real time' and in the (existential) 'here-and-now' means that policy shapers do not have to wait for *ex post* impact assessments to gain an understanding of change and how their programs might or might not stimulate it. Case study offers the program evaluator insights into the sub-strata of program and policy formation.

This, itself, gives rise to another insight: that each program evaluation is also a case study of society and its institutions. The thinking goes like this: all programs demand to be understood in their own terms through the analysis of context and contingency at the many levels of immediate experience - i.e. from classroom and sociology to office and ministry. A program is a particularity, bounded existentially as an 'instance' in action – the equivalent in society of a

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laboratory experiment. The 'case' is defined as N=1. But all educational programs are also saturated with the culture that sponsors them: they are society in microcosm. Through the analysis of a single educational program we make transparent aspects of society at large, its structures of authority and political values, for example, its cultural tolerances and leanings.

This capacity for case study to both provide insight into the unique, but also to generalise helped the evaluation community develop a methodology and a practice freed from the normal constraints of academic and professional disciplines. For example, the study of curriculum and pedagogical change in one school, say, provides a platform for generalising to other schools, curriculum projects and pedagogical strategies. But, beyond that, that same school case study provided insights into, say, the link between professional and organisational development; the integration of knowledge and action; the tension between policy, institutional management and professional practice; or the grounding of professional action in biographical experience. These insights were transportable to other contexts such as policing, nursing, the performing arts and elsewhere where innovation and change confront similar challenges and characteristics.

With good understanding of the dynamic between program action and context, the evaluator could come to each evaluation with a basic understanding of program cultures and innovation, and is? was aware of connections to 'larger social changes'. Case study conducted serially (not cumulatively), it is claimed, allows the evaluator to work out what was unique to a context and what was transferable across contexts. The promise is that a program evaluation can, by being grounded in case study methods and principles, allow generalisations about social innovation to be made at the political level but grounded in local 'stories'. Now, the combination of case study and program evaluation gave rise to a form of political engagement.

Evaluation, case study and governance

The special attraction of case study to Democratic Evaluation is the real-time proximity to people and contexts which allows for *negotiation* and authentic understanding – the capture of first-hand accounts. Evaluation conducted in context is necessarily an interactive, iterative effort with people allowing for the emergence of accounts that are tested empirically for their external validity. To conduct an evaluation case study you have to negotiate access since the enquiry can only proceed on a basis of consent; once in, to maintain consent, you have to continue to negotiate your way. Pretty soon, the case study evaluator is (to some extent or another) negotiating the meaning of data and its analysis. The enhanced quality of data that emerges from negotiation and sharing control of knowledge with the case study community is persuasive in itself – especially in those areas which lie beyond indicators-based measurement and where we rely on people's judgement.

Information exchange as a key evaluation method became a characteristic form of data generation in case-based evaluation, using information from one constituency to provoke evaluative reflections from another (a form of triangulation) – not least in the exchange of accounts between the more and the less powerful. The proximity demanded by case approaches

proved ideal for generating first- and then second-order data, checking data against observed realities and negotiating improved understanding with program participants - observation-based interviewing emerged in this context. The benefits to evaluation were multiple. Participants (practitioners, citizens, patients, pupils) were not invited to participate on the basis of equity and fairness, but because their personal experience and judgement were vital to understanding a program and its potential in ways not otherwise accessible to the evaluator. In a school curriculum project or a community policing initiative it is the teacher and police officer who have the expert view. This was collaboration, not participation. Another promise of case-based evaluation, then, was the capacity to put public and program policy to the judgement of those whose work and lives it implicated.

It is not lost on evaluation theorists that case-based program evaluation is also an instrument for enhanced public accountability and an opportunity to inform the public about policies designed to shape their lives and work. Indeed, for the democratic evaluator this was an opportunity to invert accountability relationships: as well as holding practitioners to account for their success at realising the aims of policy, program managers and political elites could be held to account for being responsive to the complex realities of professional practice. Accountability could take the form of information exchange and deliberative democratic process and case study is defined as the site where this happens. In this way, case-based evaluation analysis could integrate otherwise fragmented social and political systems by using negotiation to arrive at plausible, widely accepted versions of events and priorities - evaluation case study turns out to be an instrument for social consensus. The final link is made between program evaluation and governance.

Key characteristics of evaluation case study

In summary, the three key characteristics of case study methodology developed within an evaluation framework are *negotiation*, *contextualisation* and *democratisation*.

Negotiation: The intimacy of case study fieldwork, the developmental nature of sampling and the emergent nature of the theoretical construct demands of the fieldworker that they negotiate their way. This has significant implications for the organisation of enquiry. Unlike those studies, for example, which assign field roles of relatively low conceptual challenge (e.g. administering tests or questionnaires) case study requires the fieldworker to conduct situational analysis, to use independent judgement and to theorise on the ground – frequently in interaction with respondents. The former approach to enquiry locates intellectual control in project management, whereas case study locates it at field level. It is this proximity that allows/demands the use of negotiated understanding.

Contextualisation: The key variable is context. Some argue that case study *is* the study of context. This makes the theoretical construct of the enquiry unpredictable and, to a degree,

situational. Again, this reduces central/senior researcher control in the enquiry team. It is understanding of contexts that allows for the use of a *contingency theory* – i.e. the understanding of how people, events and phenomena are dependent and mutually-dependent on each other – but also how they interrelate in dynamic ways.

Democratisation of enquiry: This can be argued on a basis of rights – i.e. information rights which pertain to those with a legitimate interest in the program, or whose lives are implicated by it, or who have obligations in respect of it. This concerns, especially, the citizen who would generally count among those whose lives are most implicated by innovative programmes but who have least frequent access to evaluation.

Methodological implications

Such advances have been little practiced in the advanced industrial world – even as democracy has been subject to erosion by neo-liberal administration - though they have caught the imagination of evaluation theorists. It is easier to promote the methodological implications of case-based evaluation than to put them into practice – especially in the context of the contractual conditions under which program evaluation usually takes place. What follow are some of the methodological challenges of the practice of case study evaluation.

- (1) *Understanding the politics of the program:* where evaluators are at work judgements will be made of the quality and merits of a program. Since all programs can be characterised as political systems, the evaluator needs to have a good understanding of how power and authority function, and how the evaluation itself is positioned in relation to them. For example, entering a program with a senior managerial mandate creates one set of likely expectations and assumptions about the evaluation's purpose and allegiance; entering at the level of practice creates another set. In case-based evaluation the evaluator will be closely aligned to the political system that is the case (there is, in a sense, nowhere to 'hide') since his or her job is to make power and its relationships transparent. This challenge is intensified. This is not to say that the evaluator assumes a political position, but that s/he acts in a way sensitive to the politics;
- (2) *Negotiating access:* case study takes the evaluator close to the action and subjects people to what may feel like scrutiny that is both intense and judgemental. Since this is evaluation respondents will be prudent to assume that observation of their work and publication of their views may have consequences. Control over the evaluation – for this is what is implied by negotiating access - may be shared with respondents (evaluands), perhaps with the use of an ethics agreement governing mutual expectations and guaranteeing procedural confidentiality;
- (3) *Negotiation of methodology:* the methodological intimacy of case-based evaluation means that the evaluator has to respond to the rights of participants – including the right to be represented in terms which are comfortable and meaningful to them. This

may sometimes go so far as to respond to participant suggestions of how to go about the enquiry. (In one evaluation, for example, access was withdrawn by a school until the evaluators agreed to conduct observations where the school felt its character and values were best represented.) Case study imposes a collaborative imperative on the evaluator;

- (4) *Negotiation of data*: given the same fears, evaluators typically need to negotiate their way and, particularly, the use of data. As a general rule, evaluators may assume that people have rights to their own data. They may, for example, need more than one opportunity to rehearse, adapt and develop the views they eventually give to the evaluator. Confidentiality of data allows this process to take place up to the point where the evaluand is happy to release the data;
- (5) *Understanding context and contingency*: the main value of case study is its capacity to reveal relationships and context as determinants of program action. For example, to understand a curriculum innovation you have to understand each school in which the innovation is being implemented – even ‘reinventing the wheel’ of analysis on each site. Local cultures, circumstances, communities, personnel, rituals – all exert influence on the character of the innovation. Equally, understanding a school requires understanding its local political situatedness, and this requires an understanding of national political and professional contexts. Contexts, that is, are nested and bracketed in ways that require explanation. Where other methodologies seek to control variables so as to narrow down the possibilities of attribution, case-based evaluation seeks to embrace the full range of variables so as to feed comprehensive explanations;
- (6) *Combining methods*: Case-based evaluation is neutral as to method. The selection of methods is entirely dictated by the nature of the field under scrutiny, by the information needs of stakeholder audiences and by the orientations of decision-making and judgement. Robert Stake has argued that the qualitative versus quantitative divide is artificial and inaccurate a descriptor of options in relation to case-based evaluation. A dynamic tension (“binocular vision”) between internally-derived quality criteria and externally-imposed quality standards is more appropriate.

- Saville Kushner

References and further reading

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