Prototyping Evaluation Practices

In an ongoing effort to make evaluations more useful to the innovators, evaluators are increasingly using prototypes to develop, test, and refine different elements of an evaluation design (aka "practices"). This could be a technique, a process, roles, or even reports and presentations.

> Prototype – a first, typical or preliminary model of something (a product, service, practice, or process) from which other forms are developed or copied.

Evaluation prototypes are useful for two reasons. First, they give evaluators an opportunity to make their ideas about evaluation practices concrete, something that is particularly valuable when diverse groups are working on complex tasks. Second, they enable the users of the evaluation practices and findings (decision-makers, practitioners, funders, etc.) to answer the following questions:

- To what extent will this proposed evaluation practice be desirable (i.e., useful, effective, impactful)?
- To what extent is this proposed evaluation practice likely to be feasible (e.g., financially, skill-wise, technically)?
- To what extent is this proposed evaluation practice likely to be viable (in terms of policies, larger processes, key stakeholder support)?
- Based on the feedback, should we drop the evaluation practice, improve it, test it further, or adopt it?

Evaluators can draw upon two sorts of prototypes to test their ideas:

- Rapid Prototypes (low fidelity) – early and rough visual expressions of an evaluation practice, usually in the form of a physical artifact (e.g., a sketch, a presentation, a Lego installation).

- Field or Live Prototypes (high fidelity) – working elements of an idea that are functional enough that intended users can interact with and offer feedback on them (e.g., simulations, role playing, draft documents).

Evaluators, and the innovators they support, can employ prototyping to develop, test, and – if appropriate – refine and adopt almost any aspect of an evaluation design. This includes gathering and analyzing data, making sense of evaluative findings, drawing conclusions, making judgments, and using evaluation data to make decisions.

In principle, there are endless ways to prototype the different aspects of an evaluation. In practice, the most common ways are described on the table on the next page.

> For prototyping to be useful, evaluators and innovators need to ask themselves the following questions:
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> 1. What element of your proposed evaluation design (e.g., a survey, roles, a process) do you want to develop and test?
> 2. What questions would you like the prototype to answer?
> 3. What kind of prototype are you creating (i.e., rapid or field prototype)?
> 4. What prototype technique will you employ (e.g., mock-up, simulation, role play)?
> 5. What methods will you use to answer these questions?
> 6. Who will decide what to do with the answers to your questions?

Options for Prototyping Evaluation Practices

	METHOD	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE
Typical Rapid Prototypes	**Sketches & Diagrams**	Draw a visual representation of an idea(s) using a whiteboard, flip chart paper or sheets of paper.	Create a mind map of the different audiences for an evaluation and the parts of the intervention they want to evaluate.
	Paper Interfaces	Create rough paper artifacts of different elements or steps in an evaluation process.	Draw and cut out the different parts of an online survey in order to understand the number, type, and sequence of key steps a survey respondent must follow to complete it.
	Storyboards	Describe an evaluation practice or process through a number of frames, each of which illustrates the needs, roles, and perspectives of someone involved in the process, and how they interact with an evaluation practice.	Produce a set of 12 cartoon-like frames to illustrate how local residents can be engaged in a participatory process to make sense of the findings from a community survey.
	Lego Play	Use Lego pieces to represent key ideas, people, or processes, and their relationship to each other.	Create a shared measurement system for a collective impact initiative by developing and visualizing the effort's different characters, elements, and steps.
Typical Field Prototypes	**Role Playing**	Stakeholders play a role, part, or character in an evaluation process (e.g., beneficiary, manager, researcher) to better understand the experience from different perspectives.	Facilitate a mock focus group where people assume the roles of likely participants, facilitators, and recorders, to see what it's like for each role, and how the process might be improved.
	Simulation	Facilitate a process in which one or more users walks through and reflects on each key step of a proposed draft evaluation process, product, or practice.	Prepare an example of an evaluation report that showcases what potential data and results might look like and determine if and how to use the findings to make decisions, and what might be missing.
	Data Dress Rehearsal*	Implement some or all of an evaluation design to determine where and how it might be improved before its formal release.	Prepare a "dry run" of an evaluation report in order to see what kind of data the evaluation team can produce, by when.

* Inspired by presentation by Tom Kelly, former Evaluation Director, Annie E. Casey Foundation.

References
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What we Know So Far is a series of documents that summarize some of the latest thinking or developments in the field of social innovation and community change. This particular document was developed in cooperation with Tamarack Institute as part of its efforts to build capacity for community change makers.

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