

EVALUATION COLLECTIVE

WICKED
Evaluation
PROBLEMS

~ the zine

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EVALUATION METHODS
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Hello!

Welcome to volume one, issue one of the **Wicked Evaluation Problems** zine which focuses on evaluation methods.

Andi has a problem with **utilising evidence from small numbers of participants**. Read on to hear from our Evaluation Collective members Ev and Col who will provide their thoughts on the problem. Editor Val, then shares some possible next steps.



This zine has additional content and extra resources. By downloading the Adobe Aero app and scanning the QR codes throughout the zine, you can view the content!

I have been asked to evaluate a colleague's new alumni career mentoring programme for mature students. There are only five participants in the programme, however. **We think it works, but how can we evaluate it to prove it?**

Andi, Careers Advisor

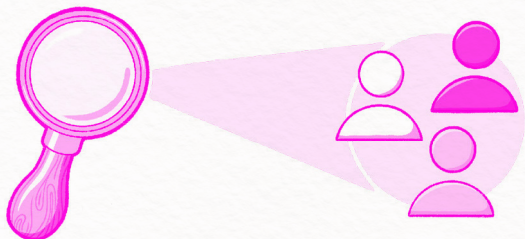
So, let's see what advice the Evaluation Collective have for Andi...



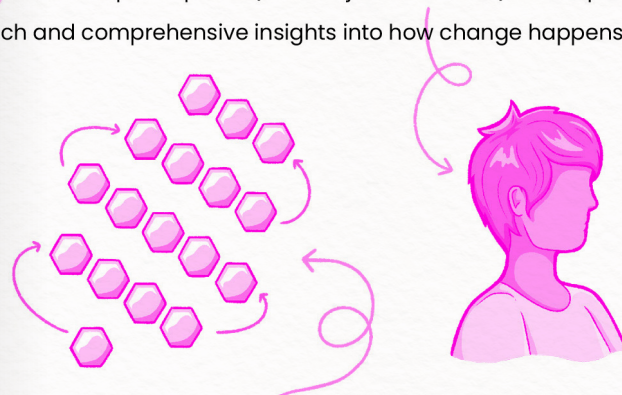
⇒ SCAN ME! ⇐

Thank you for your letter, and we hope that we can help you successfully evaluate the programme.

People often worry about projects having a small number of participants and are concerned that the sample size is too small to support 'robust' or 'reliable' statistical or quantitative approaches. It is often wrongly assumed that this approach is the only way to evidence impact. However, small cohort evaluations are just as valuable and can provide meaningful insights about what works for whom and in what circumstances. It also provides opportunities for putting an in-depth focus on the situation and experience of small specific participant groups, which are often overlooked or underrepresented in bigger studies with large and diverse samples.



You'll be glad to know that there are a range of evaluation approaches specifically designed to be used with small numbers of participants (or even just one 'case'), which provide rich and comprehensive insights into how change happens.



In many of these approaches, you would start by developing an initial **theory of change**, mapping out how and why you expect the programme to work. You should then test and develop your initial theory of change and the assumptions you make with a range of project stakeholders (including participants). This will strengthen your understanding of whether and how the programme causes the changes you want to see. You might also find it useful to identify and map alternative explanations for how these changes occur. By gathering evidence for and against these 'change mechanisms' you can build a picture of which aspects of the activity are most likely to have had the strongest impact on outcomes.



Thanks for your letter. I want to explore the programme a little more.

Firstly, it is useful to know *why* there is a **small cohort**. Was the intention only to recruit five students, or did you plan for more participants? If the latter, then it sounds like something during the programme's implementation has not been successful, which will limit the programme's impact. However, if it is the former, then the reason for the small cohort should be theorised, as Ev suggests, through a Theory of Change.



⇒ SCAN ME! ⇐



Secondly, how long is the programme intended to run? If the intention is to run it for just one year, focus the evaluation on the programme's implementation and gather evidence concerning participants' experiences and short-term outcomes. However, if it's a multi-year programme, consider how you can develop detailed evidence over time. Collecting and building on evidence over time can be very powerful, and the focus should be on understanding whether the right circumstances or conditions for change have been created. However, understanding how the programme has changed and developed over time is crucial when collecting evidence over multiple years. Therefore, a reflective journal about the programme should be kept, detailing changes made each year and the impact this has had on the intervention. This will provide crucial insight and context into how each cohort has experienced the programme.



As usual, Ev and Col are able to reassure our worried correspondent by encouraging them to reframe their thinking about what their evaluation can achieve and what they're hoping to get out of the evaluation process.

In part, this is about getting away from the idea that evaluation always has to produce 'robust' quantitative evidence. Instead, they suggest that activities with small numbers of participants can be an opportunity to delve deeper into how the activity works, to understand more about participant experiences, the thinking of other stakeholders, and to see how changes pan out over time.

*Thank you for reading
this issue of the Wicked
Evaluation Problems zine!*

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the contributors to this
volume, take a look at the
acknowledgements card.*

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