

Day of Whining and Roses

Reflections on Evaluation
Research and PLAR

Personal Observations as...

- ❑ Private sector research & consulting firm specializing in human services, education and program evaluation
 - ❑ Not an expert in PLAR
 - Three substantial evaluation studies
 - Some R&D work in trades sectors
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The Whining Part

- Resistance and capacity issues in the voluntary sector, human services
 - Environment of funding insecurity
 - Mistrust of purposes of evaluation
 - How will results be used?
 - Improving services vs making resource allocation decisions
 - Added workload that is often not resourced
 - Keeping client file data, etc.
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More Whining

- Tension - government goals for evaluation & accountability vs protection of privacy
 - Tightened Privacy/Confidentiality constraints
 - The *Privacy Act* imposes obligations on federal government departments and agencies to respect privacy rights by limiting the collection, use and disclosure of personal information
 - *Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act (PIPEDA)* - rules for how private sector organizations may collect, use or disclose personal information
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Even More Whining

- Public resistance to surveys
 - So much survey chatter that socially worthwhile research gets marginalized
 - Screening of calls
 - Refusal to sign consent forms
 - Greater mobility of population
 - Call centres developing new methods
 - Rewards for responding to surveys
 - Building banks of “professional respondents”
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Yes, More Whining

- ❑ Since 1996, continuous policy change and service restructuring in government
 - 20 to 30% cuts in staffing and budgets in 1996
 - Turn-over in staffing, loss of corporate memory
 - Continuous budget pressures
 - ❑ Example - supply arrangement
 - Restructuring
 - ❑ HRDC -- Skills Dev/Social Dev -- HRSDC -- Service Canada
 - ❑ Variations in HRD arrangements across provinces
 - ❑ “Continuous change is just the reality. Suck it up”
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Case in Point - PLA-EAS Project

- ❑ Comparative study of the impacts of PLA-portfolio on people receiving employment services from community-based agencies
 - ❑ Original research design
 - Evaluators would have access to HRDC client file data to track employment outcomes and compare with non-PLA clients
 - ❑ Names & phone numbers
 - ❑ Use of masked data to protect privacy, etc.
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PLA-EAS Project

☐ In practice..

- Not all EAS agencies generated client data
 - Contact 4 system being revamped
 - As external contractor, we were denied access to all client field data
 - EAS agencies not allowed to give us file data or names and phone numbers of clients
 - We had to get clients to sign consent forms and give us phone numbers voluntarily
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PLA-EAS Project

☐ Result:

- 650 portfolio “graduates”
- 417 signed consent forms (64%)
- 283 graduates responded to the survey
 - ☐ 68% of those who signed consent forms
 - ☐ 43% of total population of graduates

☐ Bottom line: we cannot measure impacts on more than half the participants

Now, the Roses

- As leaders in a developing field, the PLAR community demonstrates a serious commitment to evaluation research
 - To support development and innovation
 - To build the “business case” for PLAR
 - To measure client outcomes and impacts
 - To support ongoing program development
 - Effective feedback loops -- agencies, practitioners and learners
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Emerging Synthesis

- Resolving the conflict between quantitative and qualitative methodologies
 - Creative integration of approaches to get more holistic, multi-dimensional analyses
 - Policy-makers/decision-makers have learned to value qualitative findings
 - Greater trust in the rigour and validity of qualitative findings
 - Ubiquity of focus groups as means to interpret what “hard data” findings really mean
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EAS-PLA Study

- Challenge of measuring both “Hard” and “soft” outcomes
 - “We know clients ‘feel good’, but does it get them into a job?”
 - What is linkage between self-esteem, confidence, overcoming social isolation and practical changes on jobs, community integration?
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Outcome of the EAS-PLA Study

- Break down the false dichotomy between the “hard” and “soft” outcomes
 - Convincing evidence of extent to which self-confidence and self-esteem issues are barriers to employment and social integration
 - Evidence that portfolio learning is a powerful tool to overcome these barriers
 - Essential to the re-integration of marginalized populations and people facing more serious employment challenges
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Challenges for PLA Evaluation

- Learn to live in an unstable policy and service environment
 - Mutual support, networking, advocacy
 - Diversity funding sources for research
 - Innovate in development of research strategies appropriate to PLAR
 - Foundation in open, participatory methods
 - Synthesis of quantitative/qualitative
 - Confront our fears of evaluating
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Policy/Strategic Issue

- Higher expectations of learners, service recipients
 - Build into all our programs consent forms and collection of contact data to be able to do follow-up research and evaluation
-