

Building Capacity for Organizational Learning Through Evaluative Inquiry¹

HALLIE PRESKILL

University of New Mexico

ROSALIE T. TORRES

Developmental Studies Center, California

In this article we argue that evaluation is an event-driven and product-oriented activity needs to be reconsidered and reconceptualized in light of continuous changes organizations are experiencing. We describe how evaluative inquiry for organizational learning offers organization members a way of integrating inquiry processes into their daily work practices, with the outcome being learning and improved personal and professional performance. We first define evaluative inquiry for organizational learning, then describe the four learning processes that undergird evaluative inquiry. From here we explain the three phases of evaluative inquiry for organizational learning and conclude with a discussion of issues evaluators and practitioners may face in implementing this approach.

Introduction

The amount of organizational change occurring today is unprecedented. The burgeoning literature on this subject that provides advice, empirical research, case studies, and evaluations argues that today's organizations: (1) are context bound and driven, (2) are made up of people who experience change differently, (3) have many cultures, (4) include formal and informal communication structures, and (5) are politically charged. Continuous organizational change is resulting in less organizational stability and a redefinition of who we are and what we do in the workplace. The traditional structures that have given us a feeling of solidity and predictability are vanishing. This shift has placed a greater emphasis on the need for fluid processes that can change as an organization and its members' needs change. Instead of the traditional rational, linear, hierarchical approach to managing jobs, which focused on breaking down job tasks, and isolating job functions, tomorrow's jobs will be built on establishing networks of relationships. Workers will require listening, communicating, and group facilitation skills to get the work

done. As a result, more and more organizational charts, job descriptions, and functional specializations will go by the wayside. Organizations that make it through this transition will provide ‘structures that promote the flow of ideas, build trust and a unity of purpose, tap the energy and creativity of the workforce, and translate ideas into new products, processes and services’ (Goddard, 1990: 4).

The sum of these changes is that tomorrow’s organizations will: (1) accomplish their work through multi-disciplinary teams, (2) have permeable boundaries, (3) be focused on mental tasks, (4) be participative, diverse, and innovative, (5) support a professional culture of commitment and results, and (6) value peer-to-peer relationships. Organizations that have these characteristics will develop the capacity for self-renewal through the interaction of their members and will employ a systems approach to how work is accomplished. Such organizations will develop a culture of continuous learning that influences the way the organization approaches its goals – whether they be increasing student achievement scores, improving the satisfaction of clients and customers, placing higher numbers of jobless people in decent-paying jobs, or improving the profit-margin on a particular product.

In this article we define the concept of evaluative inquiry for organizational learning and describe its role within the changing landscape of tomorrow’s workplaces. We also contrast evaluative inquiry for learning with traditional and participatory forms of evaluation. As organizations adapt to new economic and societal requirements, we believe that evaluative inquiry can be a guiding force for individual, team and organizational growth and success. This is especially important given the fact that today’s employees are being asked to do more and more with fewer and fewer resources. They are increasingly being asked to make quick decisions and find they have little quality data on which to make such judgements. As the need to change accelerates, the cost of making uninformed decisions will be terribly high, possibly resulting in the failure of critical human service and education programs and whole industries.

The assertions we make in this article are based on the following beliefs:

- Dialogue, reflection, asking questions and identifying and clarifying values, beliefs, assumptions and knowledge are critical to learning from evaluative inquiry;
- Learning occurs through the social construction of knowledge and can be transformative when stakeholders are able to alter their perceptions and understandings of the evaluand;
- Learning from evaluation occurs within the context of the organization and is therefore mediated by the organization’s internal systems and structures;
- Evaluation must be increasingly responsive to the evolving information and decision-making needs of organizations;
- Evaluative inquiry should be ongoing and integrated into all work practices.

We believe that evaluative inquiry offers organizations a process for collaborating on issues that challenge success. And, by engaging in evaluative inquiry, organizations may benefit in a number of ways. Individuals and team members may: (1) better understand how their actions affect other areas of the

Evaluation 5(1)

organization, (2) ask more questions than give solutions/answers, (3) develop a greater sense of personal accountability and responsibility for the organization's outcomes, (4) act more consultatively, (5) be more likely to ask for help, (6) use information to act, and (7) be more willing to share the work that needs to be done. Additional outcomes may relate to the organization's enhanced ability to: (1) develop new products and services, (2) increase productivity, (3) improve morale, (4) experience less staff turnover, (5) experience less waste/sabotage/error, (6) experience improved financial performance, (7) experience increased efficiency and less redundancy, (8) provide more effective service to clients/customers, and (9) change more quickly.

Thus, the question becomes, how can evaluative inquiry contribute to this kind of development and growth within organizations that are operating in a dynamic, unstable, unpredictable environment? We propose that evaluative inquiry can not only be a means of accumulating information for decision-making and action (operational intelligence), but that it is equally concerned with questioning and debating the *value* of what we do in organizations (Schwandt, 1997). This approach is much more aligned with the interpretive perspective of organizational learning. That is, learning from evaluative inquiry is a social construction that occurs through the involvement of multiple constituencies each of whom represents different perspectives. It is socially situated and is mediated through participants' previous knowledge and experiences.

We see evaluative inquiry as a kind of public philosophy whereby organization members engage in dialogue with clients and other stakeholders about the meaning of what they do and how they do it. In this dialogue they pay particular attention to the historical, political and sociological aspects of the objects of inquiry (Schwandt, 1992). Evaluative inquiry for organizational learning and change encompasses the following:

- A focus on program and organizational processes as well as outcomes;
- Shared individual, team and organizational learning;
- Education and training of organizational practitioners in inquiry skills;
- Modeling the behaviors of collaboration, cooperation, and participation;
- Establishing linkages between learning and performance;
- Searching for ways to create greater understanding of the variables that affect organizational success and failure; and
- Using a diversity of perspectives to develop understanding about organizational issues.

While evaluation has often focused on a particular 'program' as the unit of analysis, we wish to emphasize that evaluative inquiry addresses issues and concerns individuals may have about various processes and systems at the departmental or organizational level as well. Thus, the unit of analysis is wherever the problem is identified.

The remainder of this article discusses the three major components of evaluative inquiry for learning in organizations: (1) the processes that facilitate learning from inquiry, (2) the three phases of implementing evaluative inquiry, and (3) the requisite elements of an organization's infrastructure. The article

concludes with a discussion of issues related to the practice of evaluative inquiry.

Learning Processes of Evaluative Inquiry

As each of the inquiry phases shown in Figure 1 (Focusing the Inquiry, Carrying Out the Inquiry, and Applying Learning) are implemented, organization members come together to engage in the learning processes of: (1) Dialogue, (2) Reflection, (3) Asking Questions, and (4) Identifying and Clarifying Values, Beliefs, Assumptions, and Knowledge.

By engaging these processes throughout an evaluative inquiry, greater insights and understandings about organizational issues are developed. Ultimately, these insights and understandings lead to informed decisions for organizational change. It is important to note that we do not view these processes as linear. For example, individuals do not necessarily first reflect, then ask questions and then identify their own values and beliefs. Rather, in many instances learning processes are inextricably linked to each other, occurring through dynamic, fluid, social interactions among organizational members.

Dialogue

Through dialogue, individuals seek to inquire, share meanings, understand complex issues, and uncover their assumptions. In other words, dialogue is what facilitates the other evaluative inquiry learning processes of reflection, asking

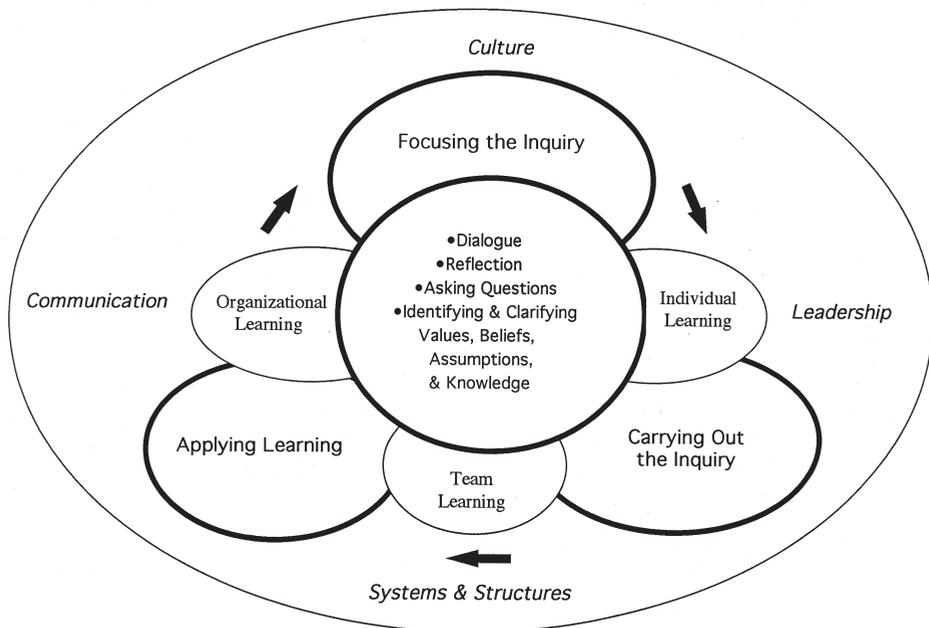


Figure 1

Evaluation 5(1)

questions, and identifying and clarifying values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge. It offers opportunities to identify possible barriers to inquiry, and potential misuses of the evaluative inquiry processes and outcomes.

Through dialogue individuals: (1) make connections with each other and communicate personal and social understandings that guide subsequent behaviors, and (2) learn about the organization's culture, policies, procedures, goals and objectives. It is the cognitive 'place' where practitioners may confront contradictions that otherwise might go unchallenged and unquestioned. Dialogue enables 'undiscussable' issues to be addressed in an open and honest way. It also helps individuals deal with errors in thinking that cause them to generate faulty conclusions on which they base their behavior.

Dialogue is where group members can agree, at least for a while, to suspend judgement in order to create new understandings. When individuals communicate and comprehend each other's viewpoints, they assimilate pieces that fit with their own way of thinking. This often results in a negotiated, new perspective that contains elements of both persons' thoughts. Thus, as individuals understand commonalities of experience through dialogue, they are more creative in implementing evaluative inquiry and in developing solutions to organizational challenges. Dialogue:

- Surfaces multiple points of view that need to be addressed and negotiated;
- Helps make individual and hidden agendas visible;
- Allows team members to develop shared meanings that are important for further inquiry activities;
- Contributes to building a sense of community and connection;
- Illuminates the organization's culture, policies, and procedures;
- Increases the likelihood that learning at the team level will lead to learning throughout the organization;
- Enables undiscussables to be surfaced and addressed;
- Facilitates individual and team learning.

Reflection

Reflection is a process that allows individuals and groups to review their ideas, understandings and experiences. When organization members reflect on their beliefs and resultant actions, they begin to understand how and why things happen the way they do. When they engage in reflection with others, they can gather more information with which to interpret their own experiences. Reflection enables us to interpret individual behavior within a holistic framework by seeing how our own behavior is affected by others and at the same time, how our own behavior affects other organization members. Reflection has been known to prompt changes in self-concept, in perception of an event or a person(s), and as a planning tool for changing behavior (Canning, 1991).

There are various times and ways in which reflection can stimulate inquiry and learning. Reflection may occur while engaged in an activity, at the completion of the activity, or for future activities. Reflection while we are engaged in some task occurs when we watch ourselves as we act out certain thoughts and actions. It is

often like standing outside or beside ourselves watching what we are doing from a different perspective. An example is the trainer or teacher who constantly monitors and assesses how well the program is going and makes adjustments as she or he goes along. Reflection that takes place after we've completed a task provides opportunities to revisit or recall what occurred in practice. Reflection on underlying premises challenges individuals to consider the mental models, assumptions, and knowledge that influenced their practice. And finally, reflection for future action or practice focuses on predicting how we will use what we learned in the reflection process (Saban et al., 1994; Schon, 1983, 1987; Schwandt, 1995).

Unfortunately, however, barriers to reflection permeate the work environment. These barriers include 'performance pressure' (time for reflection is a luxury and ill-afforded), competency traps (it's quicker and easier to keep doing what we are already doing even if it's not in the best interests of the organization), and absence of learning forums or structures (the leadership and culture do not reward learning) (Shaw and Perkins, 1991). A perceived lack of time is in part due to the larger organizational culture which has not yet made the shift from short-term to long-term thinking and has not established a learning culture. Yet, the value of reflection cannot be overlooked. It:

- Enables team members to think more deeply and holistically about an issue, leading to greater insights and learning;
- Connects the rational decision-making process to a more affective and experiential learning process;
- Challenges individuals to be honest about the relationship between what they say and what they do;
- Creates opportunities to seriously consider the implications of any past or future action;
- Acts as a safeguard against making impulsive decisions.

Asking Questions

Asking questions is a fundamental characteristic of organizations that learn. It is also one of the first tasks of any evaluative inquiry project. Yet, too often within organizations, asking questions has been seen as a means of challenging authority, evading someone else's question, or placing blame. After analyzing the taped conversations of executive meetings, Ryan (1995) found that few questions had been asked in several hours of meetings. She asks, '*what if we valued the questions we hear as much as the answers we worship in our allocation of time?*' (italics in the original, Ryan, 1995: 282). The point is, when we fail to ask questions, we lose the opportunity to gain information, insight, clarity and direction that would resolve problems more efficiently and effectively. In short, we miss out on learning at deeper levels.

Examples of not asking questions can be seen in any organizational environment where we leap from the problem to the solution without questioning what happened. In business organizations we see the lack of questioning when introducing new programs such as Total Quality Management and Business Process Reengineering. These programs are embraced with great fanfare, and within one or two

Evaluation 5(1)

years are dismissed as failures without knowing how, why, and in what ways they may have failed. We see it in organizations' training departments where trainers are asked to design and develop training programs without conducting needs assessments. In our schools, educators have too often determined that a school's curriculum should be built around Howard Gardner's (1983) multiple intelligences model without carefully considering the implications and consequences of such actions. In evaluation practice, evaluators see it when at the beginning of an evaluative inquiry the client suggests conducting a survey without having clearly identified the purpose, audiences, and expected uses of the inquiry's findings.

Not asking questions leads to action without thought. As organizations continue to change and evolve, the cost of not asking questions will increase. Organizations can no longer afford to offer products and services without knowing the extent of their effectiveness. Senior management can no longer rely solely on gut feelings and information from their inner circle to make decisions. Organizations that survive will be those that have cultures that support asking the hard questions and have developed methods, processes and systems to answer those questions. Asking questions:

- Identifies issues of key importance to the organization;
- Acknowledges employees' prior knowledge;
- Uncovers a broad range of issues on which to focus an inquiry;
- Develops a culture of curiosity and a spirit for inquiry;
- Challenges organization members' current knowledge and understanding;
- Stimulates continuous learning;
- Leads to deeper levels of understanding and knowledge.

Identifying and Clarifying Values, Beliefs, Assumptions and Knowledge

As people come together to engage in dialogue and reflection around an issue of concern, their opinions, perceptions and views of the world become operationalized. These values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge have been developed over time and are thought of as 'truths', and are what guide people in their everyday life. They are manifested in the taken-for-granted behaviors by which we function and often are manifested in opinions we hold. As Brookfield asserts, 'we are our assumptions' (Brookfield, 1995: 2). Yet, for organizations to learn, individuals and teams must continually question, test, and validate these values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge in a public way. Without examining what underlies our thinking, we are prone to continue operating in old ways, limiting the potential for learning and change.

Identifying and clarifying individuals' values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge helps organization members appreciate why people talk and behave the way they do. In addition, knowing people's values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge helps them understand why an individual or group has trouble moving forward when there is disagreement about direction. By acknowledging people's assumptions, others can understand without saying a perspective is right or wrong, or that they agree or disagree. If a particular value or belief surfaces that

is not desirable, individuals or groups can determine if the value or belief should be discarded or modified. At the same time, it is quite possible that certain values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge are validated as a result of the dialogue. In either case, what is most important is that organization members become conscious of existing values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge so that they may strive for a higher level of tolerance and understanding of each other. This learning process helps further the inquiry by valuing and respecting individuals' history, culture and opinions. Identifying and clarifying values, beliefs, assumptions and knowledge:

- Facilitates a common understanding of key terms and phrases so that language is less likely to be a barrier to effective communication and learning;
- Surfaces motivations, opinions, and attitudes which leads to greater understanding among team members;
- Helps individual team members accept change and modify their thinking and behaviors;
- Helps mediate potential conflicts among team members more quickly and effectively;
- Confirms that prior experiences and attitudes affect individuals' behavior in the work environment.

Phases of Evaluative Inquiry

Evaluative inquiry consists of three specific phases (see Figure 1) within which each of the previously described learning processes are implemented. In the *Focusing the Inquiry* phase, team members determine what issues and concerns the evaluative effort will address, who the stakeholders are, and what questions will guide the evaluative inquiry. In the next phase, *Carrying Out the Inquiry*, organization members determine the most appropriate inquiry design, methods of data collection, analysis and interpretation, and communicating and reporting strategies. The third phase, *Applying Learning*, asks organization members to develop strategies that address the evaluative inquiry's outcomes, design and implement action plans based on these strategies, and monitor the progress of actions taken.

Focusing the Inquiry

Everyday employees are faced with the need to make decisions and find solutions to new or persisting problems. Sometimes they are challenged to find answers to questions that they or other organization members are asking about program effectiveness or utility. These concerns might relate to a product's development that is behind schedule, customer complaints about service quality, a shrinking customer base, low employee morale, a training program's impact on employee performance, a teaching method's effect on student motivation and learning, the implementation of a particular organizational process, or how to best take advantage of new resources or opportunities. The approach organization members use

Evaluation 5(1)

to address these issues is what differentiates organizations that learn from their experiences from those that do not. Whenever possible, we recommend that a group of people form a team to implement an evaluative inquiry. The team focuses an inquiry using the four learning processes to: (1) define the evaluative issues, (2) identify key stakeholders, and (3) determine a set of evaluative questions that will guide the inquiry. This phase ensures that the issue of concern or interest is well-articulated and agreed upon by those who will likely use the evaluative inquiry's findings. Focusing the inquiry involves the continued definition and narrowing of the subject being studied. It:

- Allows team members to view a specific problem or issue within the larger context of the organization;
- Clarifies the relationship between program goals, design and intended outcomes;
- Enables competing expectations of the program to be explored and understood;
- Highlights potential barriers or obstacles to further evaluative inquiry processes;
- Clarifies intended users and intended uses of evaluative inquiry outcomes;
- Identifies potential misuses of evaluative inquiry processes;
- Increases the likelihood that the information needs of diverse groups of individuals (stakeholders) will be considered and included in the evaluative inquiry process, which leads to an enhanced use of findings;
- Increases the likelihood that meaningful and usable data will be obtained in the 'Carrying Out the Inquiry' phase;
- Identifies questions that may provide insights into other issues that would benefit from additional inquiry;
- Ensures that the most significant questions will be addressed in the evaluative inquiry process.

Carrying Out the Inquiry

Once a team has focused the object of their inquiry and developed specific evaluative questions, they most likely will see the need to gather data to address these questions. In most organizations today, there is an increasing amount of data being collected – from customers, clients, internal employees, consultants, and market researchers. The problem is not that there aren't enough data with which to answer an organization's questions, but that the quality, timeliness and content of existing data do not meet the learning and performance information needs of organization members. Nor is sufficient time typically devoted to assigning meaning to the data that are available – that is, analyzing available data in a variety of ways and interpreting them in terms of an organization's internal and/or external circumstances (e.g. an organizational culture which places a premium on expediency or impending government regulations which will impact the operations of the organization).

The team establishes a means for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data,

and communicating and reporting the inquiry's process and findings. The commitment to gathering data is central to evaluative inquiry. The work of evaluative inquiry in this phase most closely resembles traditional evaluation or action research efforts – with the crucial enhancement being, that the four learning processes of dialogue, reflection, asking questions, and identifying and clarifying values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge, are inextricably intertwined throughout the design, data collection, analysis and interpretation, and communicating and reporting activities. The key task at this time is to clearly link the information needs of the stakeholders to the evaluative questions and the kinds of data that will best answer those questions. Carrying out the inquiry:

- Provides trustworthy, credible information upon which to base actions within the organization;
- Gives fuller consideration to the mutual impact of contextual/political issues and data collection activities – resulting in a more sensitive, relevant, and productive inquiry design;
- Answers specific questions and reduces uncertainties about particular programs, policies, and procedures within the organization;
- Provides a means for interpreting findings in terms of crucial, mediating aspects of the organization's internal and external context;
- Provides a vehicle for deeper understanding of issues within the organization and further nourishes individual, team, and organizational learning;
- Provides specific information (recommendations) on which to take action.

Applying Learning

Applying learning takes place when the organization believes it has enough information to inform changes that will address the original object of the evaluative inquiry. This usually occurs when the findings and recommendations of an evaluative inquiry are available. Unfortunately, however, this phase of the inquiry process is often the most neglected in many evaluation studies – yet it is fundamental to reinforcing the cycle of continuous learning. The applying learning phase consists of three distinct activities: (1) identifying and selecting among action alternatives, (2) developing an action plan, and (3) implementing the action plan and monitoring its progress.

Careful deliberation of alternatives and potential solutions using the four learning processes described earlier is a critical aspect of the broader, first step – identifying action alternatives. At any one time most individuals in an organization will have considered issues and solutions for the dilemmas facing the organization – just as a matter of their own daily observations and reflections. And indeed, this kind of ongoing observation and reflection is precisely the focus of evaluative inquiry. At this point, however, organizational members are learning from the findings of a specific, systematic inquiry. These findings, along with other political, logistical, and cost considerations, will be used to identify various action alternatives, select among them, and develop an action plan to implement the alternative(s) chosen.

Once the action plan is implemented, the organization continues the processes

Evaluation 5(1)

of dialogue and reflection by asking questions and identifying values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge – in an effort to monitor progress and make adjustments as needed. Initially, these activities will be closely tied to implementing the action plan as written. However, as new issues and concerns emerge and are incorporated into a continuous learning process, the scope of this effort again broadens. Applying learning:

- Provides for judicious, carefully reasoned selection among action alternatives;
- Provides a means for understanding the implications of various potential actions;
- Provides a means for developing realistic, contextually sensitive action plans;
- Allows for the exploration of potential barriers or obstacles to implementing the inquiry's recommendations;
- Ensures that those potentially affected by the actions are involved in planning for implementation;
- Ensures that the findings from inquiry are being used to support individual, team and organizational learning;
- Reinforces an organization's focus on continuous improvement and learning throughout implementation.

Building the Infrastructure for Evaluative Inquiry

In large part, the success of evaluative inquiry is based on an organization's infrastructure; that is, the strength of the underlying foundation or framework for supporting learning within the organization. An organization's infrastructure can strongly influence the extent to which organization members learn from evaluative inquiry and use their learning to support personal and organizational goals.

One way of looking at an organization's infrastructure is to imagine it as a series of highways and byways – much like a city's road system. If we consider how people navigate through their community we see that a town's roadway system is made up of multiple-lane highways, one-way and dead-end streets, dirt as well as paved roads, roads that have signs indicating the need to stop, yield, and go, small one-lane and multiple-lane bridges, and four-way uncontrolled intersections. From an aerial view, a city's highway infrastructure looks much like a giant webbed network. This network not only allows people to get from point A to point B, but it communicates the rules of driving as well.

We use the highway metaphor for describing the importance of organizational infrastructure because many organizations undergoing transformational change or those trying to become learning organizations have characterized their efforts as a journey (Driscoll and Preskill, 1996; Preskill, 1991; Watkins and Marsick, 1996). While various modes of transportation are used to illustrate these change efforts, in each case, organization members have searched for a map that would guide them toward success. Like a highway system that depends on clear linkages and signage, a learning infrastructure requires the development of a systems approach to organizational design and management. Consistent with what is required for successful implementation of evaluative inquiry, systems thinking

focuses on processes, views work functions as interrelated and interdependent, and reflects a commitment to working on small, well-focused actions that can produce important improvements. ‘An organization that is being managed as a system addresses its business issues through systemic analysis, systemic solutions, and systemic execution of those solutions’ (Brache and Rummier, 1997: 70). In the following paragraphs we explore four components of an organization – its culture, leadership, communication, systems and structures. The nature of these components provides the foundation on which evaluative inquiry efforts can be undertaken and sustained. That is, these components of an organization’s infrastructure will facilitate or inhibit organizational learning from evaluative inquiry to varying degrees, depending on how they operate within the organization.

Culture

Culture is ‘a set of basic tacit assumptions about how the world is and ought to be that a group of people share and that determines their perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and, to some degree, their overt behavior’ (Schein, 1996: 11). Culture underpins all organization life and influences individual learning and performance. Without a culture that rewards learning, evaluative inquiry’s benefits will be significantly diminished. A learning culture evolves out of two basic elements being present in an organization. The first is encouraging individuals to take risks without fear, by protecting and safeguarding their position and dignity, and second, by developing a climate of trust and courage. Organizational culture that supports evaluative inquiry:

- Appreciates what is best about individuals and generates hope;
- Engenders trust among co-workers;
- Supports risk-taking and reduces fear of failure;
- Rewards courage;
- Values lessons learned from mistakes.

Leadership

In learning organizations, leadership occurs at all levels within an organization’s structure. It emanates from teachers in the classroom, from first-line supervisors in a manufacturing plant, from a State Department’s clinical social workers, and from nurses in hospital settings. But evaluative inquiry and organizational learning will not succeed if the executive leadership rung is indifferent or hostile to establishing learning processes and systems. Barrett (1998) optimistically writes, ‘Executives are beginning to see that perhaps their most important task is the creation of learning cultures – contexts in which members explore, experiment in the margins, extend capabilities, and anticipate customers’ latent needs’ (Barrett, 1995: 36). But developing and maintaining a learning culture requires that leaders significantly change how they define their role, as well as how they act. Organizational leadership that supports evaluative inquiry:

- Values the diversity of employees and seeks pluralistic understandings;
- Develops and maintains processes that support employees’ ongoing learning;

Evaluation 5(1)

- Develops and supports the implementation of systems to capture employee learning and make it accessible to others in the organization;
- Is more concerned with serving the organization than seeking personal power;
- Values information from inside and outside the organization;
- Involves employees in the development of a learning vision;
- Communicates a clear and consistent learning vision for the organization;
- Translates the learning vision into achievable goals and objectives;
- Models and champions ongoing learning.

Communication

It's difficult to think of anything more fundamental to establishing a learning community than communication – it affects everything we do in organizations. Communication can be thought of as a system of roadways – the methods by which we get from place to place; it carries cognitive and affective data back and forth, and in and out of the organization. Communication helps us make connections by establishing a means of crossing a chasm of uncertainty. In the case of organizational learning, communication, in the form of information, is what enables organization members to learn from one another in ways that contribute to new insights and mutual understanding. This is especially true if the communication formats provide insights and facilitate learning quickly (Torres et al., 1996). Communication within organizations that facilitates evaluative inquiry:

- Uses information for learning, not personal power;
- Disseminates information that captures a diversity of voices;
- Uses information as a means to share learning among co-workers;
- Collects and makes available logistical data, as well as providing a means for interpreting data;
- Uses technology to manage, disseminate, and increase access to information;
- Eliminates structural barriers to face-to-face communications.

Systems and Structures

The systems and structures of an organization mediate organization members' ability to interact, collaborate, and communicate with each other. Integrated systems and structures erase boundaries between departments and units, eliminate negative competition, and create opportunities for learning and knowledge dissemination. Yet, traditional organizational structures have frequently led to the fragmentation of work tasks and have contributed little to helping employees understand how what they do affects anyone else's job. Employees have functioned independently, and have had little need or ability to link their efforts with others in the organization. And, typically, there has been little incentive to collaborate across work units. As a result, the sharing of information and the development and flow of ideas throughout the organization has been constrained.

In response to the limitations of the old structures, and the needs of today's organizations, some suggest that the 'best organizational structure is one that does not seem to exist: a transparent, superconducting connection between

people and customers' (Stewart, 1997: 140). When an organization's structure is developed with a systems perspective, members come to understand how what they do contributes to other employees' work, and ultimately to the organization's success. Organizational systems and structures that facilitate evaluative inquiry:

- Support collaboration, communication, and cooperation among organization members as well as across units or departments;
- Help organization members understand how their role relates to other roles in the organization and to the organization's mission;
- Recognize individuals and their capacity to learn as the organization's greatest resource;
- Value the whole person and support personal as well as professional development;
- Use reward systems which recognize team as well as individual learning and performance.

The Practice of Evaluative Inquiry

Readers who are familiar with the evaluation literature and field may be asking, 'How is evaluative inquiry for organizational learning and change different from other collaborative, participatory, empowerment, developmental approaches to evaluation?' This is a fair question. We believe that to varying degrees, each of these evaluation approaches positions the evaluator as a facilitator of learning where stakeholders and program participants learn about themselves and each other, and the program, through their involvement in the evaluation process (Brunner and Guzman, 1989; Cousins and Earl, 1992, 1995; Greene, 1988; Patton, 1994, 1997; Shapiro, 1988).

Whereas empowerment evaluation is more rooted in the politics of liberation and self-determination (Fetterman, 1994, 1996) than participatory, collaborative, or developmental forms of evaluation, all four approaches emphasize learning as an outcome of the process, in addition to the more summative, product-oriented outcomes normally expected of an evaluation study. In this context the evaluator seeks to teach clients and stakeholders evaluation skills and processes so that they may continue to engage in evaluation practice when the 'evaluator' has left the scene.

While evaluative inquiry for organizational learning clearly overlaps with these other evaluation (as well as some organization development) approaches, we believe that it also embodies at least four distinguishing characteristics. First, evaluative inquiry is integrated into the organization's work processes and is performed primarily by organization members. It is not something that is handed off to external consultants who are to figure out the problem and tell the organization what to do. Instead, trained evaluators (either internal or external) teach organization members the knowledge and skills of evaluative inquiry, and at times facilitate and model various inquiry processes.

Second, evaluative inquiry for organizational learning is ongoing; it is not

Evaluation 5(1)

episodic or event-driven as are many evaluations and organization development interventions. Rather, it is used to nourish continuous individual, team and organizational learning. Traditional evaluation and organization development efforts are often initiated when the organization perceives the existence of a serious problem or concern. Such events trigger some kind of inquiry and change, frequently facilitated by an external consultant or an internal department unconnected with the area in which the inquiry is focused.

Evaluative inquiry, on the other hand, is quite different. It is not linear or episodic, but rather the learning that results from evaluative inquiry is continual, circular, and feeds on itself to create new and higher forms of learning in the organization – it is both iterative and self-renewing. Evaluative inquiry is also about creating a community of inquirers who use inquiry skills on a daily basis to understand and improve organizational processes and systems. It is often initiated and facilitated by internal organization members closest to the problem or issue, and may only rely on consultants to guide and teach them about evaluative inquiry and provide technical assistance in evaluation and research methods as needed.

Third, evaluative inquiry for organizational learning relies heavily on the democratic processes of asking questions and exploring individuals' values, beliefs, assumptions and knowledge through dialogue and reflection. It seeks to include a diversity of voices – it is committed to the belief that varying viewpoints enrich not only the process, but the outcomes of the inquiry.

Fourth, evaluative inquiry contributes to a culture of inquiry and occurs within an infrastructure that values continuous improvement and learning. In this sense, it is culture-bound. Evaluative inquiry becomes embedded in organizational practices. Its processes and findings nourish the development of interpersonal and professional relationships, and strengthen organizational decision-making.

Evaluator Roles

Although there is still a place for professional evaluators in this reconceptualization, the evaluator here, whether internal or external, is a collaborator, facilitator, interpreter, mediator, coach, and educator, of learning and change processes. She or he may aid in getting the process going initially, but in some cases intervenes thereafter only periodically to keep people actively involved in the inquiry process. Whether internal or external to the organization, the evaluator's role becomes that of facilitating dialogue and reflection through question-asking and identifying and clarifying organization members' values, beliefs, assumptions and knowledge as they engage in each phase of the inquiry.

The evaluator encourages all voices to be heard and holds individuals accountable for any behaviors that discourage growth and action during the evaluative inquiry process. Thus, the evaluator is responsible for maintaining a climate that supports a spirit of inquiry, reciprocity, and community. Finally, the evaluator works with stakeholders and program participants to collaboratively determine the strengths and weaknesses of various organization programs, services, products, practices, processes and systems, so that the organization may continue to

grow and develop, and maintain a climate that is supportive to the continuous learning of all its employees.

Implementing Evaluative Inquiry in Today's Organizations

Even those of us who firmly believe that the approach to organizational learning we've described in this article is the most appropriate way to function in organizations fully realize the numerous and formidable challenges we may face in instituting evaluative inquiry as part of our work practices. All organizations, however, are in a process of becoming – they are constantly evolving. It is highly unlikely that we will find any one organization where all of the infrastructure components described earlier are fully positioned to support evaluative inquiry. In many cases, the challenges we face relate to the organization not fully accepting and embracing the role of learning. In other cases, organizations lack an understanding of how to implement processes that support learning from inquiry. Some examples of these challenges include:

- An anti-learning organizational culture exists; it is reactive, not proactive;
- Leadership talks learning, but doesn't model learning;
- Communication channels and systems are underdeveloped or underutilized to support organizational learning;
- Information is not willingly shared; the organization holds on to a belief that information is power to be held by a few;
- Dialogue and asking questions are not valued;
- Organization members do not generally trust one another;
- There is a fear of making mistakes; risk-taking is avoided;
- Independent work is more highly valued than collaborative work;
- Evaluative activity is seen as threatening the status quo;
- Evaluative activity is seen as an 'event';
- The diversity of stakeholders appears to be overwhelming;
- Evaluative activity is seen as costing too much in terms of money, time, and/or personnel resources;
- A general fear of change permeates the organization;
- People are suspicious of any data collection effort.

How then, can evaluation practitioners and consultants work within organizations to change the culture, to help them establish the means and knowledge for evaluative inquiry? The first task is to help organization members understand the components of their organization's infrastructure and their impact on evaluative inquiry and organizational learning efforts. For instance, we may need to help the organization's leadership understand that its present reward system is unlikely to support risk taking, and/or that the organization's present styles and methods of communication do not encourage collaboration among employees.

It is not so much that all of the infrastructure elements must be in place and operating as described here in order for evaluative inquiry to succeed. Rather, evaluative inquiry itself serves as a major vehicle for increasing understanding within organizations and as catalyst for organizational change. The following

Evaluation 5(1)

strategies are not quick-fix solutions to the challenges cited above – systemic organizational change often takes several years to materialize. However, these methods will support incremental but substantive movement toward shaping a culture of inquiry and learning:

- Start with small inquiry projects before tackling larger issues;
- Invite people who you know are supportive of learning and willing to share their learning – don't try to convert everyone at once;
- Include as many diverse viewpoints as possible in each inquiry effort and value their involvement by listening and considering what they have to offer;
- Provide informal training to organization members on evaluative inquiry skills;
- Inform organizational leaders (at all levels) about your efforts – provide ongoing feedback about the inquiry's progress and results;
- Ask organization members what the costs are of *not* evaluating their efforts;
- In every situation model the four learning processes (dialogue, reflection, asking questions, identifying and clarifying values, beliefs, assumptions and knowledge);
- Continually seek feedback on how the inquiry is progressing;
- Always emphasize the importance of the use of evaluative inquiry processes and findings ('What have we learned?' 'What do we do now?' 'Did our actions make a difference?');
- Publicize and celebrate the application of learning – let others know what you did, how you did it, and what has happened as a result.

Evaluative inquiry offers organization members, evaluators, and organizational development and management consultants another way of conceptualizing their practice. In particular, we believe that evaluative inquiry can be conceived of as a form of organizational learning that contributes to individual and team growth and development. Through dialogue and reflection, asking questions and identifying and clarifying values, beliefs, assumptions and knowledge, organization members and the organization can learn from its practices and experiences to create a better future.

While we acknowledge the idealism our approach embodies, we believe that without such aspirations we are destined to make the same mistakes over and over again. In short, evaluative inquiry not only contributes to better decision-making within the organization, but we believe that engaging in evaluative inquiry can be its own reward; it can be intrinsically satisfying and integral to building an organization's community of practice.

Note

1. Concepts presented here are discussed more fully in H. Preskill and R. T. Torres (1999) *Evaluative Inquiry for Learning in Organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

References

- Barrett, F. J. (1995) 'Creating Appreciative Learning Cultures', *Organizational Dynamics* 24 (2): 36–48.
- Brache, A. P. and G. A. Rummel (1997) 'Managing an Organization as a System', *Training* 34 (2): 68–74.
- Brookfield, S. D. (1995) *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Brunner, I. and A. Guzman (1989) 'Participatory Evaluation: A Tool to Assess Projects and Empower People', *New Directions in Program Evaluation* (42) 9: 17.
- Canning, C. (1991) 'What Teachers Say About Reflection', *Educational Leadership* 49 (3): 18–21.
- Chawla, S. (1995) 'Conclusion: Reflections of Learning From a Gathering' in S. Chawla and J. Renesch (eds) *Learning Organizations: Developing Cultures for Tomorrow's Workplace*, pp. 501–8. Portland, OR: Productivity Press.
- Cousins, J. B. and L. M. Earl (1992) 'The Case for Participatory Evaluation', *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 14 (4): 397–418.
- Cousins, J. B. and L. M. Earl (1995) 'The Case for Participatory Evaluation: Theory, Research, Practice', in J. B. Cousins and L. M. Earl (eds) *Participatory Evaluation in Education*, pp. 5–18. London: Falmer.
- Driscoll, M. and H. Preskill (1996) 'The Journey Toward Becoming a Learning Organization: Are We Almost There?', in K. E. Watkins and V. J. Marsick (eds) *Creating the Learning Organization*, Vol. 1, pp. 67–80. Alexandria, VA: American Society for Training and Development.
- Fetterman, D. (1994) 'Empowerment Evaluation', *Evaluation Practice* 15 (1): 1–15.
- Fetterman, D. (1996) *Empowerment Evaluation: Knowledge and Tools for Self Assessment and Accountability*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gardner, H. (1983) *Frames of Mind*. New York: Basic Books.
- Goddard, R. W. (1990) 'The Rise of the New Organization', *M W* 19 (1): 3–5.
- Greene, J. G. (1988) 'Stakeholder Participation and Utilization in Program Evaluation', *Evaluation Review* 18 (5): 574–91.
- Patton, M. Q. (1994) 'Developmental Evaluation', *Evaluation Practice* 15 (3): 311–19.
- Patton, M. Q. (1997) *Utilization-Focused Evaluation: The New Century Text*, 3rd edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Preskill, H. (1991) 'Metaphors of Educational Reform Implementation: A Case Study of the Saturn School of Tomorrow', paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Evaluation Association, Chicago, IL, October.
- Ryan, S. (1995) 'Learning Communities: An Alternative to the Expert Model' in S. Chawla and J. Renesch (eds) *Learning Organizations: Developing Cultures for Tomorrow's Workplace*, pp. 279–91. Portland, OR: Productivity Press.
- Saban, J. M., J. P. Killian and C. A. Green (1994) 'The Centric Reflection Model: A Kaleidoscope for Staff Developers', *Journal of Staff Development* 15 (3): 16–20.
- Schein, E. H. (1996) 'Leadership and Organizational Culture', in F. Hesselbein, M. Goldsmith and R. Beckhard (eds) *The Leader of the Future*, pp. 59–70. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Schon, D. A. (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner*. New York: Basic Books.
- Schon, D. A. (1987) *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Schwandt, D. R. (1995) 'Learning as an Organization: A Journey Into Chaos', in S. Chawla and J. Renesch (eds) *Learning Organizations: Developing Cultures for Tomorrow's Workplace*, pp. 365–80. Portland, OR: Productivity Press.

Evaluation 5(1)

- Schwandt, T. A. (1992) 'Better Living Through Evaluation? Images of Progress Shaping Evaluation Practice', *Evaluation Practice* 13 (2): 135–44.
- Schwandt, T. A. (1997) 'Evaluation as Practical Hermeneutics', *Evaluation* 3 (1): 69–83.
- Shapiro, J. P. (1988) 'Participatory Evaluation: Towards a Transformation of Assessment for Women's Studies Programs and Projects', *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 11 (5): 555–90.
- Shaw, R. B. and D. N. T. Perkins (1991) 'Teaching Organizations to Learn', *Organization Development Journal* 9 (4): 1–12.
- Stewart, T. A. (1997) *Intellectual Capital*. New York: Doubleday/Currency.
- Torres, R. T., H. S. Preskill and M. Piontek (1996) *Evaluation Strategies for Communicating and Reporting: Enhancing Learning in Organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Watkins, K. E. and V. J. Marsick (eds) (1996) *Creating the Learning Organization*, Vol. 1. Alexandria, VA: American Society for Training and Development.

HALLIE PRESKILL, Ph.D., is a faculty member in the Organizational Learning and Instructional Technologies Graduate Program at the University of New Mexico, where she teaches courses and conducts research in the areas of program evaluation and organizational learning. Please address correspondence to University of New Mexico, College of Education, Rm 114 Albuquerque, NM 87131-1266, USA. [email: hpreskil@unm.edu]

ROSALIE T. TORRES, Ph.D., is Director of Research and Evaluation at Developmental Studies Center (DSC) in Oakland, California where she implements a participatory, organizational learning approach to the evaluation of DSC's programs. [email: rtorres@devstu.org]