

Diversity of Methodology: debate on modern evaluation methods

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Michelle describes the panel session delivered by members of the steering group for the UKES Midlands Regional Network on issues and opportunities relating to innovation in evaluation.

We live in a world of constant change, where skill sets can become obsolete in just a few years. Professionals need to consistently upgrade and develop themselves. In this panel session, hosted by Karl King (Director of Service Development at Winning Moves), I, along with two other members of the steering group for the UKES Midlands Regional Network (Tracey Wond, UKES Treasurer and an academic at the University of Derby and Hamayoon Sultan, Independent Evaluation Consultant; formerly Global Monitoring and Evaluation Lead at Islamic Relief Worldwide) reflected on the implications of this for the evaluation community.

In a lively discussion, we considered:

- The demand for new methods and new approaches in evaluation;
- The challenges of implementing these in practice (what new methods there are and how we use them);
- How we can assess whether new methods and approaches are working appropriately, and;
- The conditions needed for innovative approaches to be adopted successfully in an evaluation.

What were the new methods and approaches we were debating? We discussed the use of new ideas and techniques in evaluation, through reflecting on our first applications of new methods such as QCA or alternative Difference-in-Difference designs and our experiences of doing this. We considered the opportunities and challenges in integrating approaches from other disciplines, such as co-production. We also discussed how we respond to encouragement from commissioners and colleagues to innovate, whether this is through specifying particular approaches or simply through explicitly welcoming 'innovation'.

There were some areas of consensus. We agreed that techniques (whether new or not) need to be 'appropriate' to the evaluation question and the context in which the evaluation is being conducted. We also acknowledged that CECAN (and others) were promoting new methods as a way of tackling complexity.

We reflected on the fact that innovation is not just about new methods but rather how we as evaluators do our jobs, the questions we ask and the quality of our analysis. Moreover, that innovation was a function of the relationship between the evaluator and the funder / commissioner. Here, we considered that a good relationship between evaluator and funder / commissioner is important to support the use of new methods and approaches. This relationship needs to be built on trust and openness. There needs to be an acknowledgement of where the evaluation is treading 'new ground' and a willingness to embrace the risks that this might entail, that some things might not proceed to plan or work.



However, key ideas that emerged from the debate were with regards to our role as evaluators:

1. A lot of new approaches are being developed deep in particular specialisms. This sets the bar really high for existing and emerging evaluators – exaggerating any cases of ‘imposter syndrome’ already present.
2. The use of new techniques often requires the development of new language or ways of understanding what is being done and what is being learnt. This can place a capacity building demand on the evaluator.
3. The application of techniques takes time in the early stages. It is therefore helpful if the evaluator is well-resourced, but there also needs to be space for thinking and reflection.

Two overarching areas of reflection were therefore on the structural aspects and developmental aspects of evaluation that can support new methods. Structurally, we need to work collaboratively with policy actors and commissioners to embrace evaluation. Developmentally, we posed a question of how we support the CPD of evaluators to keep up with innovations in the way we do evaluation and the methods we use.



“We look forward to continuing the discussion at events for the Midlands Regional Network; please do join us.”