

The Insight Evaluation Approach

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ABSTRACT: Projects and programmes that are often the objects of our inquiry are actually no more than mental constructs. They are the result of numerous conditions that happen to come together for one brief moment. Their funding, activities, and results arise, dwell in a state of constant flux for a period of time, and then pass away. Insight Evaluation provides an approach to see projects and programmes clearly, without false impression.

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A short time ago, we published a manuscript in which we proposed an Eastern paradigm for evaluation (Russon, 2008). Towards the end of the manuscript, we wrote, “Judgement is central to most Western notions of evaluation. If evaluators who use an Eastern paradigm of evaluation no longer judge, what would they do? I would argue that their main aim would be to provide insights into the object of inquiry. I am experimenting with ways to apply some of the techniques of insight meditation into my evaluation work” (p. 76).

After the manuscript was accepted for publication, we decided to further explore some of the ideas that it contained. In order to do this, we formed an advisory group of evaluators and people with long experience doing

meditation.¹ The group provided a valuable perspective into how insight meditation techniques might be integrated into the process of evaluation.

The purpose of the present article is to report on the progress of integrating these two disparate fields. In order to present the work in a systematic manner, we decided to use an organizing structure similar to the one that Daniel Stufflebeam (1999) used to compare and contrast more than twenty different approaches in his landmark Occasional Paper entitled *Foundational Models for 21st Century Program Evaluation*. That organizing structure consists of the following elements:

¹ The authors wish to acknowledge the invaluable guidance of the advisory group of Kerry Benson and Meg Gawler.

- Overview
- Philosophical underpinnings
- Advance organizer
- Purpose
- Assumptions
- Typical audiences
- Questions
- Methods
- Main proponents
- Types of evaluation for which this approach would be appropriate
- Strengths (key advantages)
- Limitations (common criticisms)

Overview

When we speak of “insight” meditation, we’re actually using a loose translation of the Pali word *vipassana*. The literal meaning of *vipassana* is “to see clearly”—specifically, to see reality clearly without false impression. Often times our senses create the impression that appearance is reality, whereas in fact it is only a limited and fleeting aspect of reality (Shambhala, 1991). Insight Evaluation seeks to bring the quality of seeing clearly, without false impression, to the projects and programmes that are often the objects of our inquiry.

Philosophical Underpinnings

Legend has it that a young prince abandoned a privileged life to undertake a protracted inner search for the meaning of life. After several attempts, the aspiring Buddha resolved to sit in meditation under a tree until he attained full realization. After overcoming obstacles, the Buddha finally experienced reality through a purified heart and mind.

The Buddha subsequently dedicated his life to helping others achieve enlightenment. Many of the philosophical underpinnings of Insight Evaluation are contained in the teachings of the Buddha, such as the *Abhidhamma*. What we have attempted to do is integrate insight meditation

techniques into the process of evaluation without including the entire Buddhist cosmology.

Assumptions

According to the *Abhidhamma* philosophy, there are two kinds of realities—the conventional and the ultimate. Conventional realities are the basis of conceptual thought. Concepts are objects that appear to be stable but, upon further examination, are really just mental constructions (Bodhi, 1999).

The projects and programmes that are often the objects of our inquiry are good examples of conceptual thought. They are the result of numerous conditions that happen to come together for one brief moment. Their funding, activities, and results arise, dwell in a state of constant flux for a period of time, and then pass away.

Ultimate realities are ultimate, not in a metaphysical sense, but simply because they can be directly experienced (Salzberg & Goldstein, 2001). They are the irreducible components of the existence that lie behind our mental constructions. These components are the units of analysis for Insight Evaluation.

Purpose

The purpose of Insight Evaluation is to examine the conventional realities of the objects of our inquiry in order to extract their irreducible components. It is these irreducible components that maintain their intrinsic natures independently of the mind’s constructive functions and form the ultimate realities of the *Abhidhamma* (Bodhi, 1999).

Questions

The *Abhidhamma* identifies four types of ultimate realities (Bodhi, 1999). The first of these is matter: physical or material elements.

Evaluation questions that might be asked about this ultimate reality include these:

- What combination of conditions have come together to give rise to the object of inquiry?
- What are the primary elements (i.e., solidity, temperature, cohesion, movement) that make up the object of inquiry?
- How are the primary elements combined to form the object of inquiry?

Consciousness, the second ultimate reality, is important because it is the principal element of experience. And experience is the basis for the analysis of reality. Evaluation questions that might be asked about this ultimate reality include the following:

- What are the wholesome roots (e.g., generosity, loving kindness, wisdom) of the object of inquiry?
- What are the unwholesome roots (e.g., greed, hatred, delusion)?
- How does the moral foundation of the object of inquiry translate into action?
- What are the results of the action?

Mental factors, the third ultimate reality, are states of mind that arise along with our consciousness. They are what colour our consciousness. Evaluation questions that might be asked about this ultimate reality include these:

- In what ways do you connect with the object of inquiry?
- What aspects of the object of inquiry hold your attention?
- What characteristics set the object of inquiry apart?
- How do you feel as you experience the object of inquiry?
- How do people relate to the intent of the object of inquiry?

Nirvana, the fourth ultimate reality, is the state of final deliverance from the suffering that arises from pain, change, and conditionality. The path to Nirvana is based on contemplative teachings such as the Four Noble Truths. Evaluation questions that might be asked about this ultimate reality include the following:

- How do people associated with the object of inquiry experience their lives?
- What are the root causes of their problems?
- How could these problems be resolved?
- What is the way leading to improved quality of life?

Methods

Insight Evaluation uses contemplative technology (Wallace, 1999) to collect the information needed to answer the above questions. This technology involves using the mind as an instrument for analyzing the object of inquiry (Wallace, 1999).² The analysis involves two types of attentional strategies: concentration and mindfulness.

Concentration involves refining the ability of the mind to remain steady on the object of inquiry—a focusing of our normally scattered energy. Mindfulness builds upon concentration by stressing the ability to remain attentive to the constant changes in the object of inquiry (Epstein, 2007).

The Insight Evaluator directs her attention to the aspects of the object of inquiry that are predominant in her awareness. This would include observing physical sensations, sounds, thoughts, images, and emotional responses. The observations should be made equally, fully and impartially, without judgment, attachment, or

² Evaluators who subscribe to the rationalistic paradigm use external instruments to collect data. Evaluators who subscribe to the naturalistic paradigm use their bodies as instruments. Evaluators who subscribe to the Eastern paradigm use their minds as instruments. Meditation is a way of calibrating the mind as an instrument.

aversion (Kutz, Borysenko, & Benson, as cited in Steele, 1995).

As the Insight Evaluator reacts to her observations, she also focuses attention on her own biases, positions, beliefs, identifications, attitudes, and assumptions that give rise to her reactions (Almaas, 2002). In this manner, the evaluator, the object of inquiry, and the act of observation itself are retrospectively analyzed as an integrated whole.

Through this holistic approach, the Insight Evaluator becomes aware of the content of perception, thoughts, and emotions. However, perhaps of greater value, she also begins to recognize patterns and habits that dictate their formation and dissolution. (Kutz, Borysenko, & Benson, as cited in Steele, 1995). This is important evaluation information.

The juxtaposition between impartial observation and the ethical imperative implied by some of the evaluation questions may seem like a paradox. Mindfulness does require a suspension of judgement of right and wrong. However, it is also important to acknowledge that acting in an unethical manner is a root cause of suffering. It is an inescapable corollary of the Law of Karma.

The Law of Karma refers to the universal law of cause and effect. It reflects the notion that every action leads to a result that reflects the nature of that action. Wholesome acts lead to wholesome results and vice-versa (Salzberg & Goldstein, 2001). In some sense, the role of evaluation may be thought of as helping the object of inquiry to understand its Karma.

Typical Audiences

Insight Evaluation has a strong imperative to improve the object of inquiry and thus, in some small way, to improve the world. The altruistic nature of this approach makes it unique with regard to typical audiences. Instead of being conducted for the client or stakeholders alone, Insight Evaluation is conducted for the benefit

of all humanity. It recognizes that all of our lives are inextricably linked.

Types of Evaluation for which Insight Evaluation would be Appropriate

This approach would be ideal for evaluating processes because they are very amenable to direct experience. And according to Ian Davies (2008), EVERYTHING is process. Results (i.e., outputs, outcomes, and impacts) are simply frozen pieces of process. The methods that evaluators use to collect data are techniques for freezing chunks of process.

As such, the determination of what, in reality, constitutes results is somewhat arbitrary—it is a matter of mere convenience. Results are like a security blanket for donors who have bought into a mental construct and provided funding. Results are not the be all and end all of evaluation (Davies, 2008).

Strengths

As previously stated, the purpose of Insight Evaluation is to see the object of inquiry clearly. The Buddha identified five hindrances to seeing clearly: desire, aversion, sloth, restlessness, and doubt (Salzberg & Goldstein, 2001).

Judgement, the purpose of most Western approaches to evaluation, is associated with the hindrance of aversion. The problem with judgements is that they are often based on concepts. Concepts put blinders on our perception, making it difficult to be open to new possibilities and experiences. Forestalling judgement allows us to enter into a conscious alignment with the higher order (Tolle, 2005).

If and when judgements are necessary, they should be done with discriminating wisdom. Discriminating wisdom is defined as “the capacity to distinguish between direct and conceptual experience; sometimes used to distinguish wholesome or beneficial thoughts

and actions from unwholesome or harmful ones” (Salzberg & Goldstein, 2001).

Also, Insight Evaluation intentionally does not focus on desired results (i.e., outputs, outcomes, and impacts). An orientation toward results is associated with the hindrance of desire. Desire is the tendency to abandon the reality of experience in favour of an imaginary world. When we are looking for desired results, it precludes us from simply being open to whatever presents itself to us (Salzberg & Goldstein, 2001).

Limitations

Insight Evaluation may require special training. Ultimate realities are so subtle and profound that a person who lacks training may not be able to perceive them. Such a person may not be able to see the ultimate realities because her mind is obscured by concepts that shape reality into conventionally-defined appearances (Bodhi, 1999).

Conclusion

In this paper, we have presented an overview of a new approach called Insight Evaluation. The distinguishing feature of this approach is that it integrates insight meditation techniques into the process of evaluation. The methodology of Insight Evaluation involves treating the evaluator, the object of inquiry, and the act of observation itself as an integrated whole. Use of this approach can help audiences see projects and programmes clearly, without false impression.

Our preconceived notions, expectations, and judgements oftentimes colour what we are observing. Our mind is easily clouded with distracting thoughts unrelated to the present moment. Employing mindfulness and concentration, the evaluator is able to forestall judgment and experience a clearer understanding of the object of inquiry.

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