The Centre for Youth Impact

Evidence and Impact
Essay Collection

The value of feedback for impact and beyond
- Kai Hopkins

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Impact is not a concept that is restricted to the youth sector. It has been cause for ongoing discussion in many diverse arenas –from Agricultural development to Zealous humanitarian assistance.

There is, however, one common thread that unites us; we are searching for affordable and manageable ways to get the impact monkey off our backs. In this essay I explore different types of evidence of impact and will put forward what we describe as "the most neglected, important piece of the evidence puzzle," which, if used effectively, can not only help demonstrate the extent to which you are having an impact, but also improve the actual impact you have.

The solution, I think, lies in making the perspectives of the people who are meant to enjoy the benefits of a service – the primary constituents – visible to the decision makers in the system. These constituents' voices, often called "feedback", are widely acknowledged to be central to managing the performance of programs. Objective examination of our feedback practices, however, can often identify deficiencies that are limiting their effectiveness.

When collected systematically, and rendered as 'data', feedback is an early indicator of change taking place, and can be compared with

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other evidence of results (including objective measures and impact evaluations) to enrich your understanding of what is happening now. Moreover, it can enable you to respond to what is happening and maximise impact in almost real-time.

My premise in this essay is that the collection of feedback is the "right" thing to do, and while your interest in it may first and foremost be to meet the mounting pressures to demonstrate impact, its real value, and what will hopefully make it a lasting pillar of your evidence toolbox, is its capacity to deliver on-going programme improvements.

Feedback is not a new phenomenon, and I think it can effectively be used by anybody; people with different impact aims, capacity and budgets can all learn from applying feedback loops to their work.

The right thing

Incorporating constituents' voices may seem like a no-brainer; we should all listen to those we aim to help, and it is our duty to do so. We owe them the opportunity to participate and if we want to be accountable to them, we should give them a voice. This is, by and large, accepted across the sector and as a result, many organisations regularly solicit feedback.

However, in order for feedback to really add value, especially as part of the impact puzzle, feedback needs to be collected systematically and used – discussed within an organisation and then responded to, with constituents informed of both what will be done in response to the feedback received and, equally importantly, what is outside the scope of the organisation to deliver.

This is where a potentially tokenistic process can become transformative, not just the right thing to do, but the bright thing too.

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The bright thing

When I say that feedback is the most neglected important piece of the puzzle, I do not mean it is the only important piece. Ongoing feedback is inherently more concerned about performance management than accurate measurement and, as such, should not replace traditional metrics but complement them.

Therefore, an enhanced concentration on feedback is not intended to diminish the importance of deeper research, evaluation or impact evaluations. It is, rather, a question of ensuring that these are not prioritized over feedback but are used in concert with it.

For example, if your programme is designed to increase confidence in young people, demonstration of impact may feel like something of struggle. Feedback, however, can be of enormous helping in developing consistent and coherent answers to impact questions. It is possible, for instance, to ask young people – cleverly – about changing confidence levels and with repetition of questions and frequent data collection, to track perceptions over time.

This, in turn, allows you to monitor the ways in which corrective action taken resonates with primary constituents.

By including questions on service quality and how you interact with constituents – your relationship with them – you can also improve what you offer and how.

Young people may not have a huge choice among service providers, but they can choose to disengage from your services. Knowing how they view you as an organisation, your staff

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Asking questions about the degree to which people trust your services, whether they feel that they are treated fairly and with respect, whether they feel comfortable approaching you with problems and their willingness to participate can all help you understand and respond, improving service-client interactions and the likelihood they will get something positive from you.

In other words, not only can you get a sense of outcomes achieved but you can also use your responsive action to their feedback to drive progress towards those very outcomes.

Amplifying the power of feedback

Survey findings, in isolation, can be limited. Using survey findings to inform a dialogue with respondents, however, significantly extends their explanatory power.

Structured dialogue validates findings, deepens interpretation, and finds possible solutions. It also allows organisations to manage expectations of constituents and ensure that they feel their feedback is taken seriously, avoiding possible "survey fatigue".

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In fact, the very process of feedback, with its cycle of repeated listening and response can also improve the relationships you hold with your constituents, making them feel part of the organisation and involved in their own development.

Another way in which survey findings can be amplified is by comparing answers to surveys against other data sets providing measures of outcomes. When this is done, real-time feedback can turn out to be a predictor of outcomes further down the line.

For example, education studies have found that student feedback accurately predicts patterns of learning gains associated with that teacher, including in other classrooms and in subsequent years[1].

How might this apply to your organisation and your future outcomes? Active use of feedback, in real-time, can not only allow you to make corrective changes to your current provision, but can provide predictive indicators of larger changes, which may take a long time – and more money – to capture.

Identifying such indicators can take time but the value in doing so is that you can intervene early and ensure that those most in need stay on track.

Many organisations already collect feedback and you might be one of them.

From our experience, however, the primary problem is not a lack of feedback collection, but that much of that collection is neither consistent nor systematic, often due to the previously mentioned prioritisation of other impact measurement tools; it is collected in an ad hoc way and, as a result, is often not

1 "Learning about Teachin g: Initial Findings from the Measures of Effective Teaching Project", MET Project Policy Brief (The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation), December 2010: 5

processed in a disciplined way within the organisation.

This means that the resulting data is inherently fraught with questions about validity, raising doubts for staff that, understandably, struggle to interpret, let alone act on, the information.

Even if do you collect good feedback data, the area in which we see most organisations slipping up is in using the data. Organisations often struggle to put solid management systems in place to process feedback and, as a result, are not as effective when analysing data, including comparing it to other sources of data (such as objective success measures), sharing the feedback as an indicator of impact or, ultimately, using it to drive programme change.

An effective and systematic approach would see feedback as part of the DNA of an organisation, not as an add-on, separate to programmes and service delivery.

At the same time, however, it is advantageous for organisations to avoid an overly bureaucratic process, which can adversely affect its longevity. The key would seem to be proportionality. Systematic need not mean bureaucratic, but, rather, suggests a disciplined approach that adds value to the organisation, while keeping its core values intact.

As a result of the growing recognition of the importance and value of listening, the Blagrave Trust was interested in learning more about how youth-oriented charities listen and respond to the young people they help.

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Case study: Blagrave Trust

In the summer of 2015, I spoke to eight Blagrave partners, in order to understand and document both their youth feedback practices and the obstacles they faced in listening.

All eight of the partners selected were collecting some kind of constituent feedback. Partners tended to use the following data collection methods:

- On-going needs assessments and progress reviews
- Feedback forms – during and after interactions
- Comment and suggestion boxes
- Youth boards and councils
- Informal feedback through conversations and observations
- Young people input on staff recruitment
- Feedback from other constituent groups – parents for example

One common theme identified was the difficulty of collecting feedback from young people with different needs, capacities and at different levels of engagement with services.

There was a shared concern that formal feedback practices could impinge on the delicate relationship between the organisation and the young person and add to the already high levels of survey fatigue.

It was therefore seen as imperative to consider the context in which feedback was sought, offering young people multiple channels so they could choose how and when they give feedback; comment boxes, social media, SMS surveys, games and role-play can all be used to collect feedback from young people in a fun and engaging way.

In addition, feedback could be sought from those around the young person – parents, carers and teachers. One charity sent an online survey to the parents of non-service users to better understand what they would like to see offered and what would move them to engage with the organisation.

Experience suggested that the above concerns were most easily addressed if surveys were kept short and "light-touch". And ensuring that any feedback is responded to can be the best way to avoid survey fatigue - making sure survey results and intended improvements are articulated back to the young people themselves: "We asked you. You told us. Here is what we propose. What do you think of that?"

While collecting feedback was identified by organisations as the hardest part of the listening process, using the feedback – both in terms of understanding it and then using it for improvements – was seen as significantly easier.

However, our discussions with the eight partners suggested that organizations were underestimating or overlooking the challenges in inherent in using feedback.

Feedback was often not collected in a systematic or structured way, which can make using the data systematically for improvement difficult. Moreover, the feedback being collected was often informal – a combination of stories and anecdotes. While still valuable information, the lack of strong management systems in place to bring this data together, with a lot of this information residing only in individuals' heads and thus risking being lost before it could be used, thus made performance improvement or impact demonstration even more challenging.

Another related and very common challenge identified was a lack of in-house staff to manage the listening process. This is a two-fold challenge. The first was a lack of staff capacity, with people stretched and with blurred lines of responsibility, feedback often falling between several job descriptions. The second was capabilities. The staff often consist of social workers or child workers and conducting effective feedback loops – designing surveys, using different survey tools, discussing the feedback and engaging with constituents around the data – is not necessarily part of their skill set.

Next steps and the future of feedback

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When faced with challenging circumstances, we often defer to automatic responses, sometimes described as the fight, flight, freeze or fawn response.

As demand for impact evidence increases and pushes us into a metaphorical corner – how will we respond? We could fight: try to regain power and control over the measurement agenda - what we should measure, how and why. We could take flight: avoid the debate, and hope we can outrun the ever-advancing demands. We could freeze: stay quiet and hope the whole thing passes us by so we can emerge to business as usual. Or we can fawn: simply comply with the pressures as requested, and attempt to satisfy the hand that feeds.

The reality is that neither taking flight nor freezing are likely to be successful options, especially beyond the short-term. We could fawn and 'knuckle under', doing whatever is asked of us without wanting to rock the boat, and for many organisations, this might be the preferred choice.

A more constructive option, however, would be a collective push towards taking greater control of the agenda. Not an all-out fight pushing back on the need for evidence full stop, but rather accepting the need to demonstrate impact and choosing a solution that gives organisations power and control.

It seems clear that the requirement to demonstrate impact is here to stay and while it may be frustrating to be asked to demonstrate things we already know to be true, it can also provide huge opportunities and, often, concentrating on these opportunities allows us to construct impact measurement tools that best suit our organisations and the people that they help.

Systematic feedback, as illustrated, can be amongst the most powerful and constituent-focused of these tools and is simple, affordable and achievable.

Most importantly, however, it can empower you – empower you to become a better, more responsive learning organisation, which can improve its impact rather than simply measure it.

As improving genuine outcomes for those we aim to help is of primary importance to all organisations, whatever their feelings towards challenges regarding or processes for impact management, embracing the most neglected important piece of evidence out there – the voices of those we aim to help – would seem to lie at the heart of what impact is and why we measure it.

With this in mind, it would seem clear that effective and systematic use of feedback within your organisation is more than simply an impact measurement tool but, rather, a key element of both the help you already provide and the help you desire to provide in the future.

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About the Centre for Youth Impact

The Centre for Youth Impact is a community of organisations committed to working together to progress thinking and practice around evidence and impact measurement in work with young people.

We offer:

- A 'route in' to information, support and discussion in relation to evidence and impact
- Local and national events where you can collaborate with others, learn and build momentum
- Resources to support meaningful impact measurement
- An inclusive platform to promote debate and ideas

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