APPROACH TO EVALUATION AT REFUGEE YOUTH

By Jim Coe
Approach to evaluation at RefugeeYouth

Approach to evaluation at RefugeeYouth

Introduction

RefugeeYouth takes a radical approach to evaluating its work, essentially not distinguishing in any formal way between evaluation and the planning and delivery of its programmes. This process is described in the brief below.

On the face of it, other organisations might find it difficult to replicate this approach, given that it appears so different to usual ways of thinking about evaluation, and about organisational functioning more generally. But without necessarily adopting all the detail, there are some key transferable principles that others could consider including within an overall approach to evaluation, notably:

1. Embedding an iterative cycle of planning, delivery and review, as far as possible breaking down the formal distinctions between these different phases.

2. Prioritising informal, ongoing ways of reviewing and assessing progress over more formalised methods of ‘monitoring and evaluation’.

3. Encouraging participation at all stages, including as far as possible in agenda setting.

4. Fostering a spirit of enquiry and challenge, recognising that this takes effort and time to create and maintain.

5. Focusing attention on what can be meaningfully assessed. Recognising that the important thing is to create opportunity for meaningful reflection - the question of what tools are used to do this is secondary.

6. Ensuring there is a strategic underpinning that gives context to all the above.

Programme

RefugeeYouth’s overarching method is to facilitate others’ leadership: ‘in terms of who can take leadership, we try to keep that open as possible; leadership is something that everyone is encouraged to take, where and when they can’.

To enable this, programmes are conceptualised and constructed according to a flexible structure, within which young refugees engaging with the organisation can find a level of engagement that they are comfortable with. The tiers of involvement are broadly at the following three levels.

• ‘Food, fun and friendship’ – at the foundation of RefugeeYouth’s work is the creation of a community and environment where people can meet, make friends and have new experiences.

• Leadership development – beyond this, RefugeeYouth looks to create opportunities for, and support, young people to develop new confidence and new skills through active engagement in, and leadership of, specific activities and projects.
• Drawing on young people’s experiences, RefugeeYouth takes and supports action to bring about more structural change, creating space for young people to investigate the issues that affect their lives, and push for change, often in creative ways – for example through the ‘Becoming A Londoner’ publication and ‘Refuge in Films’ festival.

The following key principles underpin programme delivery at all levels.

Participation

RefugeeYouth describes itself as ‘an organisation of young people rather than a service for young people’. As part of this, involvement in agenda setting – as well as implementation and review – is key, on the basis that it’s more difficult to expect somebody to take a lead if someone else has already decided what the project is to be. Methods of working accommodate this principle, for example emphasising the importance of continual discussion, sharing information even if it means going over ground already covered: ‘if there are things that need to be discussed, or people have things to say, you have to make that space’. Fostering leadership depends on people having the information that they need in order to be able to make decisions. To facilitate this, RefugeeYouth operates an open doors policy in its meetings, even to the extent that: ‘if there’s something going on, you’ll have to start a meeting 5 or 6 different times, new people want to be involved’.

“If involvement in agenda setting - as well as implementation and review - is key, on the basis that it’s more difficult to expect somebody to take a lead if someone else has already decided what the project is to be.”

If people have a personal investment in decisions reached, they are naturally more interested to see if, and comment on whether, a particular project or activity has worked or not, so are more willing to actively participate in evaluation and review. Seeking participation only at the evaluation stage, and not in the design, is unlikely to reap such useful information because people who are involved only in the later stages have less of a stake.

RefugeeYouth is about creating opportunity for participation rather than setting expectations that people will participate in pre-determined ways: ‘not everybody wants to look at the whole process; some just want to be in an environment where they are doing things … having the three levels helps people see how they can fit in’. Some move from ‘fun, food and friendship’ to planning activities for other people; for others, it’s enough simply to be there. The way in which activities and projects evolve allows young people to contribute in different ways and at a pace suited to their situation: ‘everyone is a leader, people are ready at different times … people can get involved to the level that is appropriate to them’.

Valuing individuals’ contributions

The starting point is that everyone has experiences to bring to the table: ‘If you think somebody doesn’t have something to offer then you’re not working hard enough to find out what they have to offer’. Collective knowledge is built through the mix of experiences that different people bring. And distinctions between staff and refugees visiting the organisation are minimised, with everyone learning from everyone else, echoing the radical education philosophy of Paulo Freire whose vision was of an approach where ‘the teacher is … taught in dialogue with the students, who in their turn, while being taught, also teach’. The emphasis is on fluidity and

keeping structures loose and processes as open as possible, rather than investing in setting up formally representative structures.

The notion of valuing people as individuals extends to the view of the organisation as a vehicle for exploring and supporting people’s needs and interests, rather than seeing people as serving the organisation, as cogs in the organisational machine.

**Key principles** in thinking about programme delivery and goals, and thus about evaluation, include the following.

**Change is relational and complex**

Recently there have been moves by government and other funders to stress the importance of quantifying outcomes and making assessments of value for money, even in complex social and political contexts. In response, it is argued that such approaches can be reductive and not necessarily reflective of reality. Likewise, RefugeeYouth is keen not to falsely quantify results or overstate influence: ‘you can’t claim people’s personal successes as your own; a million different factors influence people’s decisions’. Assessments of effectiveness and impact can be made on the basis of informed and critical judgement, but proof doesn’t come into it.

Reflecting young people’s experiences, RefugeeYouth is interested in practice more than policy. To this end, the organisation works with various implementing agencies – social workers, youth workers, housing workers, staff at the Home Office – to explore with them how their organisational ways of working and behaviours affect the young people with whom they interact, creating a platform for interchange between young people using the services and those providing them. The nature of this relationship is radically different to that normally experienced; it ‘twists the power balance around, young people are interacting on their own terms’.

RefugeeYouth is interested in any resulting changes in the provision of service by those agencies and individuals with whom they have come into contact. But the organisation is particularly, and more directly, interested in building structures loose and processes as open as possible, rather than investing in setting up formally representative structures.

The notion of valuing people as individuals extends to the view of the organisation as a vehicle for exploring and supporting people’s needs and interests, rather than seeing people as serving the organisation, as cogs in the organisational machine.

**Evaluation**

**Evaluation is an integral part of the mix: “we build evaluation into everything we do, it’s not just an add-on at the end”**.

The approach draws on Participatory Action Research, in which research is conducted by and for the people affected by an issue or set of issues, who then jointly formulate and work towards solutions. This method is built on a cycle of action, reflection, learning, planning, and further action. For RefugeeYouth, this involves constantly considering ‘what was good and not good, what we’ve learnt – and what we do with that learning’. And, in fact, in the way RefugeeYouth operates, the distinction between planning, implementation and evaluation is actually a somewhat false one: the cycle operates in such a way that in exploring and developing ideas and solving problems, people are simultaneously planning, acting and reviewing. In this way of working the process itself is the product, not merely a means to deliver the product: ‘the meeting is the youth work’. In the same way, evaluation is ‘embedded in the working ... not a thing that is separate’. Again, without having drawn explicitly on Paulo Freire’s analysis, this approach is a classic enactment of the model he advocates in which ‘action and reflection occur simultaneously ... critical reflection is also action’.

---

2 Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Penguin Books, 1972, p99; Freire contrasts this approach with reflection without action (“verbalism”) and action without reflection (“action for action’s sake”), p60

3 E.g. http://www.bigpushforward.net/

---
in the effects on the young people who are involved in designing and running these workshops: their confidence levels, their ability to articulate their feelings, their awareness of the issues affecting their lives, for example.

Ethos is more important than method

Creative ways are used to promote reflection – using visual props and role-play for example – but review happens mainly through discussion. Often this occurs through a semi-structured format, for example group processes that in turn (i) identify key outcomes, (ii) rate them, then (iii) discuss and explore the different ratings. But it’s not the method that is the important thing, it’s the desire and willingness to explore and hear different views: ‘sometimes you can get caught up with the method, you don’t go as deep as you would if you have a conversation about it’. Arguably, you are more likely to get people to give their true feelings over a cup of tea than through formal organised processes: ‘if you get too caught up in the formal stuff, are you learning what’s true or what people think they should say?’

This approach relies for its success on having, and visibly demonstrating, a questioning ethos: ‘why do it that way, who will be part of it, who benefits, what does it achieve?’

The organisation proactively encourages questioning and discourages people from falling into line: ‘if something feels not quite right, people are encouraged to share it’. This approach takes more time and results come about in a less structured way than many would be comfortable with, but the consequence is a more dynamic exploration of experiences and solutions. That the organisation values and seeks diversity of input is exemplified by its series of ‘Mixing It Up’ events, representing part of the wider commitment to ‘taking every opportunity to bring together different people to try different things and have new experiences’. New people constantly arriving helps keep the organisation on its toes, alongside a ‘fear of being institutionalised’.

“Projects should be underpinned by our central aims, so it’s important everyone has a chance to input into these.”

It can be a constant struggle to generate critical comment, because the default is that ‘people want to stay positive’, and also because of cultural constraints, with many young people from different communities being uncomfortable to talk about themselves, and inclined to think their own feelings should be subsumed to the interests of the wider community. To counter this, RefugeeYouth creates a deliberate space where people are encouraged to express how they feel about decisions, processes, events and activities, and their results.

Strategy

‘Most of our work comes about from people coming to us, saying, ‘can you help with this?’

In taking decisions about what to prioritise, RefugeeYouth is essentially following the energy. This approach enables the organisation to be highly opportunistic in terms of the paths it follows.

But the result is not chaos (or not in a bad way), because there is an overarching strategy giving it form. This guiding strategic outline is developed and reviewed every year at an annual conference involving workers, trustees, young refugees, students and workshop facilitators: ‘projects should be underpinned by our central aims, so it’s important everyone has a chance to input on these’.

A broad workplan emerges from this process, along with a restatement of values, principles and organisational vision: ‘it’s important for people to know the aims we set ourselves ... the values behind the organisation; do they
agree to these words, is this what we stand for? The more people who share and agree [the vision], the stronger the organisation will be.

The plan produced from these sessions might not look like a typical organisational business plan but all the ingredients – mission, vision, goals, strategic priorities – are there, albeit not laid out so hierarchically.

RefugeeYouth’s approach seems hugely radical, but in many ways it fits within a more orthodox tradition. For example, organisation theorists having been talking for 30 years or so about the merits of ‘simultaneous loose-tight properties’, meaning having maximum operational flexibility within a clear strategic direction and set of values, and this is very much the logic behind RefugeeYouth’s overall approach.

The organisation is also in tune with some more recent thinking about effectiveness – that emerging from discussion around the efficacy of international aid, for example. RefugeeYouth looks like an archetypal example of an organisation that rejects the idea of relying on ‘planners’ with big, formalised blueprints in favour of operating as ‘searchers’ who follow demand, adapt to the prevailing conditions, find things that work through trial and error and then replicate them, are ‘close to the customer’ and value feedback, so are well placed to make intelligent and informed decisions about what does actually work in practice.

5 William Easterley, The White Man’s Burden, Oxford University Press, 2007, e.g. p5-6