Evidence of Impact: Research and Evaluation Methodologies for Work with Young People.

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Abstract:

Brathay Trust is a National charity that works with around 5000 deprived young people annually. In 2010 Brathay established a role for a head of research in a Knowledge Transfer Partnership with the University of Cumbria. Brathay needed to find rich and robust ways to evidence the impact of their interventions that would add to and not detract from the process of the youth work. This paper outlines the development of a research strategy that managed the interface between the internal demand for qualitative data, and the external demand for quantitative data.

Introduction:

In July 2010 the University of Cumbria employed a Research Practice Leader under a ‘Knowledge Transfer Partnership’ (part funded by the Technology Strategy Board) to work at Brathay Trust, Ambleside, Cumbria. The aims of the KTP were to support Brathay Trust to develop and embed a sustainable research and evaluation strategy that would enable the youth work team to better evidence the impact of their practice, continue to learn and
develop that practice, and secure future funding and commissions. This paper highlights the
difficulties in developing a research strategy that meets the needs of a variety of
stakeholders internally and externally.

The Context: Brathay Trust

Brathay Trust is a National Charity for youth work and works with a diversity of young
people from around the U.K. Brathay operates from four regional bases (North West,
London, Yorkshire and Humberside and Cumbria) and offers both community based sessions
and residential programmes from its key centre in Cumbria. 5000 young people per year
attend Brathay programmes and are funded by trusts and grants, by local authority
contracts, and individual organisations such as schools and youth clubs. Each of these
stakeholders wishes to know the success of the programmes that they funded, and Brathay
needs to generate robust evidence of success to win future contracts. Additionally the
climate in which Brathay operates is increasingly performative, as evidenced by the
increased demand for impact evaluations, (Ellis and Gregory, 2008:v), and the drive for
payment by results, social impact bonds and outcomes-based commissioning (Nevill and
Lumley, 2011: 2).

Developing a Research and Evaluation Strategy at Brathay Trust

Brathay has always had a strong commitment to research and in 1996 a Research Academy
was established. However, until the founding of the KTP project in 2010, staffing resources
and staff expertise made this aspiration difficult to achieve. With the KTP in place, the
challenge to create a research strategy that would stay true to the humanistic, experiential
youth work roots of the organisation whilst satisfying the managerialist needs of the
external context is now a reality. A four staged approach was adopted to address this dilemma: a baseline audit, development of a theory of change, development of a research strategy, and a literature review on the specific needs of research with young people.

1. **Baseline Audit.**

The first step towards developing an R&E strategy was to carry out a survey of Brathay stakeholders and identify their expectations and requirements for R&E. The stakeholder analysis revealed a diversity of views about what the goals of research should be and how research should be designed and implemented. The table 1 below highlights some of the key differences:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internal stakeholders</th>
<th>External stakeholders</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Respect for the individual</td>
<td>• Evidence based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Learning</td>
<td>• Outcome focussed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Experience</td>
<td>• Quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Primacy of the youth work process</td>
<td>• Indicators of success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Human centred</td>
<td>• Quantitative data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Fulfilling potential</td>
<td>• Value for money</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory</td>
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<td>• Social justice</td>
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*Table 1: Internal and external stakeholders’ expectations and requirements for research and evaluation.*
The key theme revealed in the analysis was that internal stakeholders (e.g. practitioners, young people) and external stakeholders (e.g. examples) held very different views about the aims and practice of research. Internal stakeholders tended to value research that was applied and qualitative, that reflected the values of youth and community work and the clients (e.g. empowering, participatory, collaborative, person-centred, inter-personal, experientially focused). External stakeholders, on the other hand, were more likely to emphasise the importance of research being evaluative, focused on impact and hard outcomes, quantitative and as meeting the needs of the funders. From the research team’s perspective it was clear that the R&E strategy developed had to meet both these sets of requirements without compromising on the central values and philosophy of the organisation.

Perhaps the most important difference highlighted above concerned the variety of opinions over what should be the nature and purpose of evaluation. The diversity of views voiced by stakeholders echoes a similar debate in the academic and practice literature, about what should be the focus of evaluation - ‘soft’ or ‘hard’ outcomes – and nature of data collection - qualitative or quantitative. Evaluation literature presents a variety of opinions over what constitutes evidence and outcomes, and the terms ‘objective’ and ‘outcome’ are often used interchangeably. Invariably ‘hard outcomes’ are privileged over ‘soft outcomes’. Hard outcomes include a clearly definable, quantifiable, measurable results e.g. a qualification, finding work, moving into permanent accommodation, whereas soft outcomes often are an intermediary step on the way to achieving a hard outcome e.g. improved self-confidence; improved communication skills, and often cannot be measured directly or tangibly.

Evaluation data required by funders typically includes ‘hard’, quantitative outcomes - such
as numbers going into jobs or the numbers gaining qualifications. However, there is a growing recognition that such measures taken in isolation are inadequate in demonstrating the success of a project and these hard measures of success do not give a complete picture of a participant’s ‘development’. It is often both unlikely and inappropriate for many projects (including many of those delivered by Brathay) to be expected to achieve ‘hard’ outcomes from the groups that they typically work with, particularly over the short-term period that clients often spend at Brathay. Additionally, typically methods of measuring ‘hard’ outcomes tend to be quantitative, impersonal and incompatible with organisations such as Brathay. Indeed the audit of practices at Brathay highlighted where evaluation is used, it is primarily involved in evaluating ‘soft’ outcomes and uses ‘person-centred, qualitative methodology’.

Although idealistically opposed to focusing on ‘hard’ outcomes, the necessity of providing such data to attract and maintain funding is a reality. Certainly, a prevalent theme in the practice literature focuses on the pressure placed on projects to provide ‘hard data’ to satisfy funders and commissioners. Recent government documents have urged commissioners of services to put outcomes at the heart of the strategic planning process and for the achievement of outcomes to be used as a key indicator of success in service delivery (Charity Evaluation Services, 2009, Ellis and Gregory, 2008). In order to meet the various needs of stakeholders it is clear that Brathay has to embrace mixed methods, which are capable of providing hard and soft, qualitative and quantitative data, within a framework of guiding principles and values.

Action research was an appropriate methodology within which to frame the research strategy as it is practitioner based, it is focussed on actions and development, and it is
congruent with the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984) adopted in Brathay Trust’s training practice.

Action research is: “a type of applied social research that aims to improve social situations through change interventions involving a process of collaboration between researchers and participants” (Jupp, 2006:2), this meant that it was appropriate as a tool for practitioners researching work with and for young people, and that it was an appropriate method for developing the research strategy for Brathay. It “directly addresses the problem of the division between theory and practice...[it] integrates the development of practice with the construction of research knowledge in a cyclical process” (Somekh 2005:89), and so would help develop a theoretically grounded, and practically useful research approach at Brathay. The fact that action research is highly contextualised was a benefit rather than a limiting factor, as it was purely the context of Brathay’s work that we sought to understand. We hoped that Dadds (2004) claims would be substantiated, that ‘...... the act of engaging in practitioner research can lead to almost immediate professional change, since our perceptions, and often our actions change the minute we start looking and reflecting.’

2. Brathay’s Theory of Change

The second stage of the project was to establish what it was that Brathay did. In action research terms, this involved exposing the ‘architecture of practice’ as revealed by their saying, doings and actions (Kemmis, 2009:471). This was so embedded at Brathay that it had become tacit rather than explicit knowledge. Review of a series of programmes, focus groups, and case studies were used to develop an explicit understanding of what it is that Brathay does. We expressed the theory underpinning Brathay using a Theory of Change Model. This:
“defines all building blocks required to bring about a given long term goal. This set of connected building blocks – interchangeably referred to as outcomes, results, accomplishments, or preconditions – is depicted on a map known as a pathway of change” (Patton: 2008:349).

Theory of Change is being used widely as an explanation of the causal links that tie programme inputs to programme outputs. It seemingly sidesteps epistemological issues despite its scientific realist approach. The Charities Evaluation Services (2011), Annie Casey Foundation (2004), and the Aspen Institute of Community Change (2004) all advocate use of a theory of change for research and evaluation, and the Mayor of London has endorsed this approach as part of the ‘Time for Action’ campaign against violence. Greater London Authority has embedded the theory of change into their ‘Project oracle’ evaluation framework (2010).

The output of this review of Brathay’s programmes was a single meta-theory of change that spanned the organisation, and supported multiple micro-theories of change that underpinned each programme. Brathay’s Macro Theory of Change is shown in table 2 below:
# Issues Addressed at Brathay:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Offending</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Employment</th>
<th>Community Cohesion</th>
<th>Personal Agency</th>
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## Sub Issues Under Each Meta Issue:

- **Gangs**
- **ASB**
- **Prevention**
- **Rehabilitation**
- **Probation**

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<tr>
<th>Attendance</th>
<th>Behaviour</th>
<th>Work Readiness</th>
<th>Leadership</th>
<th>NEET</th>
<th>Low Aspirations</th>
<th>Community Issues</th>
<th>Politics</th>
<th>Democracy</th>
<th>Designing Services</th>
<th>Oppression</th>
<th>ASB</th>
<th>Challenging Negative Stereotypes</th>
<th>Exploitation</th>
<th>Vulnerable Young People</th>
<th>Marginalisation</th>
<th>Substance Abuse</th>
<th>Individual Issues</th>
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## Populations We Work With in Each Sub Issue:

- **Young Offenders/at School Pupils**
- **FE Colleges Youth**
- **Families**
- **Carers Teenage**
risk of offending
College pupils
organisations
LAC
pregnancy
Schools
Sexual exploitation

YOUTH PRACTICE MODELS SELECTED TO SUIT EACH ISSUE, SUB ISSUE AND POPULATION.

Residential and Community settings, Experiential learning, Levels of Relationship and Attachment, Locus of Control, Emotional Intelligence, Challenge and Risk, Creativity, Respite, Peer mentoring, Feedback and disclosure, Information, advice and guidance, the Empowerment Model, Choice Theory, Outdoor and Environmental learning.

Table 2: Brathay’s Macro Theory of Change for Youth Development

These theories of change gave us a clear process to follow and to measure with the evaluation strategy, and generated a plethora of research questions. We continue to research theories of change. Two further evaluation models needed to precede and proceed the theory of change. Prior to developing a theory of change, practitioners needed to develop a needs led approach (Holt, 2010), investigating the needs of the groups that we were commissioned to work with, and establishing their current trajectories. Although a discrete approach, ‘needs led’ working also linked to and complemented an Outcomes Based Accountability (OBA) approach. This approach was developed by Friedman (2005) in response to his observation that organisations evaluated what they were doing, and how well they were doing it more often than they measured what impact that they had. They focussed on the easy stuff. He points out that there is little point having a really effective
service if no one is benefitting. OBA focuses attention on what is being provided on the basis of the evidence of needs and on the impact of those services. A simple flow was established from a needs led approach, through a theory of change to outcome based accountability. These were embedded in an action research framework, using mixed methods and were able to communicate to internal and external stakeholders.

3. Developing Brathay’s Research and Evaluation Strategy and evaluation toolkit for practitioners

The prior tasks facilitated the development of the research strategy and training programme of evaluation techniques for Brathay practitioners.

Using Kirkpatrick’s (1970) Hierarchy of Evaluation, a ‘Brathay Hierarchy’ was developed. This enabled us to identify the levels of Brathay’s current practice, explain to practitioners the different levels and types of evaluation and research, and their respective benefits, and identify and allocate responsibility for different levels of evaluation. The levels are shown in table 3 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level 5: Bespoke Research</th>
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<td>Level 4: Distance Travelled</td>
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<td>Level 3: Learning and Behavioural Change</td>
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<td>Level 2: Reactions and Satisfaction</td>
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<td>Level 1: Data monitoring</td>
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*Table 3: Brathay’s Hierarchy of Evaluation and Research*
A theory of change and outcome based accountability model have been used to then develop Brathay’s Programme and Evaluation Planning Framework. This guides practitioners through a process of ‘needs led’ youth work that plans inputs and outputs and embeds the theory of change. This is shown in figure 1 below:

![Figure 1: Brathay Trust’s Programme Planning and Evaluation Framework](image)

A training programme has been established that is based on the premise that good youth work involves reviews that are the embodiment of evaluation. This programme develops understanding of key terminology, the research hierarchy, the planning framework, and of ways to collect impact data that is qualitative and quantitative. The 20 practical evaluation tools that we have launched suggest ways that youth workers might capture that data (the Brathay Toolkit). This we hoped would enable the practitioners to feel empowered to carry out evaluation themselves. A catch all basic system of end of programme evaluation was added into the evaluation process to captures both qualitative and quantitative data, enabling a rudimentary distance travelled to be measured.
4. Literature Review

“Researching children’s experience is premised on the view that children are not all the same. It resists the idea that what we are setting out to research is ‘the child’ and replaces this piece of automatic discourse – very central to the practice of developmental psychology in particular – with the recognition that children encounter their worlds in an individual and idiosyncratic manner and that their worlds themselves are different”

(Greene and Hill, 2009:3)

Heath et al (2009:4) make the case that research with young people is distinct from research with children or adults. This is because they spend more time in age specific institutions than at any other time, they are subject to large amounts of legislation, they are more monitored than any other group due to society’s concern for ‘successful transition’, and they are relatively powerless. Traditionally research was ‘on’ young people and was conducted by adults. Times are changing though, and we increasingly see children and young people as social actors who have the right to take part in decision making (O’Brien and Moules 2007:385). Gaining access to hard to reach groups is an issue – either because the young people you wish to research are not likely to engage, or the subject that you wish to research is not in common parlance. It may be necessary to use online technology or specialist organisations to try to access such information, or to engage peer researchers who are more likely to succeed. Curtis et al (2004:170) found that many focus groups operated better without a researcher present. They found the setting, staffing and structure of research with hard to reach young people of paramount importance. Ethics also needed greater consideration in work with young people.
These are all issues that Brathay tackles with its participatory approach to youth development and empowerment, and practitioners are conversant with a variety of proven and highly effective tools and practices with which to engage hard-to-reach young people.

At the heart of Brathay’s values is the belief that children and young people are social actors who have a right to be involved in research about issues of concern to them (Shaw, Brady, and Davey, 2011:4). Green and Hogan (2009:3) point out that this premise is based on the understanding that each child is a unique and valued experiencer of his or her world. As such, Brathay has developed the role of young researchers. They have run a number of projects that are led by young people, including Cockermouth Young Researchers who have designed and conducted their own research, Young Inspectors, who assessed local youth services, and Brathay’s Yorkshire and Humber Peer Mentors who conducted interviews for case studies on participatory practice for an external commission. As an organisation that works with some of the most difficult young people, Brathay staff were already adept at using creative tools to engage the hard to reach, and this strength amongst the team of practitioners enabled them to adapt their practices to facilitate the authentic involvement of young people in research and evaluation, thereby influencing programme design and effectiveness.

Findings

Findings from the first meta-analysis took a sample of 360 young people attending programmes between February and July 2011.

*Who comes to Brathay?*
28% of the young people had a single disadvantage and 50% of those reported more than one disadvantage. 43% of those reporting a disadvantage have trouble with school. Other common backgrounds included offending, special needs, English as a second language and home problems.

The mean age of young people attending programmes was 14 years of age, but with a spread from 11 to 24.

*What did they come to do?*

The young people attended 22 programmes between them of a mean length of 4 half day sessions. These included residential only, and community based youth work sessions with residential. There was an average of 18 young people per course from a wide range of 3 – 67 young people on each.

Programmes had an average of 5 intended outcomes each, and these varied. The majority of outcomes related to developing self knowledge, followed by understanding of the impact of self on others, and skills for behavioural change.

*What was the impact?*

48% of the young people completed feedback forms.

The mean score for enjoyment was 9 out of 10. 49% of young people scored their enjoyment as 10 out of 10. This was because it was fun, they made friends, they did lots of activities, they learned a lot and found it challenging (in percentile order).

- *The activities were fun and energy boosting.*
- *Great fun, freedom to find our own answers.*
- Made new friends. Had a lot of fun. I enjoyed working with my new friends in a team.

- Activities were fun and well explained.

- Was so much fun and I discovered I could do so many challenges.

- Was fantastic, allowed me to grow as a person and do the things I never thought possible.

- Because it's been challenging and pushed me out of my comfort zone but well cared for always.

The mean score for ‘how much did you learn’ was 8 of 10. 84% of young people scored their learning as above 7 out of 10. They learned about teamwork, confidence, outdoor skills, positivity, communication, being open minded, empowerment challenge (in percentile order).

- Teamwork, leadership skills, communication, how to succeed without cheating

- I learned how to cope better out of my comfort zone - I overcame feeling shy

- Provide equipment instruction, the activities through which they could be developed

- Try things instead of saying no

- Better at communication, and giving feedback

- I learnt that promise and trust are important, you can't judge a book by it’s cover

- I can do the things I don’t feel I can

Young people’s self-assessments showed that they felt that they had improved by 8 out of 10 points on a 1 – 10 scale. 84% had scored their improvement as above 7 out of 10.
Brathay had helped young people to learn and develop by supporting them, building their confidence, encouraging them, helping them, and by talking to them, developing positive relationships (in percentile order).

- Encouraged young people but did not force anyone into activities
- Gave me confidence to face new challenges
- Encouraged me and prompted my confidence
- Pushed me out of my comfort zone, helped me get to know myself and other people better
- Didn’t shout. Kind and helpful also respectful.
- Talked about life situations that will happen and do activities with a team
- They helped boost my self-belief

As a result of coming on a Brathay programme, young people felt that they would be more confident, do nothing differently, be more determined, be a better team member, be more positive and be calmer (in percentile order). Some of these unsurprisingly reflect the areas of learning.

What did Brathay do to help that change?

44% of young people believed that the work with Brathay was very participative, giving them lots of opportunities for choice and control. 31% felt that it had been participative ‘enough’, and 25% felt that they needed more opportunities to participate.

34% of young people thought that the Brathay staff were ‘brilliant’, 27% rated them as ‘good’, 22% rated them as ‘great’, 17% as ‘very good’, and 1 person ‘didn’t think much of them’. This gives us confidence that staff expertise is a key strength at Brathay. Key reasons
for liking the staff were that they were friendly, that they didn’t interfere too much, that they were helpful and supportive (in percentile order).

**Best and worst.**

The best thing about Brathay was the staff, followed by the activities on offer, and the estate itself – a peaceful haven of a countryside hall. 6% of respondents said that they could not identify a single ‘best’ thing, it was all good.

- **Staff they are mazing at what they do, so committed.**
- **The staff. They are the bees knees, cats pyjamas, ants pants.**
- **That the lodge is in the forest and it’s nice and quiet and the views are amazing**
- **There is nothing bad, I think the best thing is probably all the lovely decent people here.**
- **The atmosphere, it is a great location, lovely people, everything is good**

Areas for improvement include the food, and the range of activities, although overwhelmingly 42% of participants said that nothing needed improvement.

- **The food was not very nice as I didn't eat much but I've still enjoyed it**
- **doing more adventurous activities**
- **As far as I can see the Brathay staff made my stay perfect in every way.**

Feedback on the strategy six months on from the Chief Executive of Brathay Trust is that:
“The Research Strategy has provided Brathay with the strategic direction required to improve what we offer to our beneficiaries. It has done this through:

• Providing policy and academic context to inform both current practice and future development and design

• Providing tools and techniques to help practitioners to engage with research

• Providing drive for the organisation to ask questions about what we do now and how we might work in the future

• Build credibility with partners and clients through sharing knowledge and awareness that we are a ‘thinking and learning organisation’

• The main issues we have had with the research strategy have been about the organisation’s capability to engage with it as quickly as we would have liked. This has not been due to the strategy itself, more about the challenge of culture change, bringing practitioners into a place where they not only value what research gives them, but value the time they put in to building Brathay into a research driven organisation.” Godfrey Owen, Chief Executive.

Conclusions

The feedback from the chief executive and the impact evidence that has been generated in six months shows that it is possible to meet internal and external needs with a mixed methods framework. Participative action research has proved to be an effective method for both the research with young people, and research with practitioners, and cultural change is being effected organisationally. Our experience has substantiated that research with hard to
reach young people has specific demands, and our experience of creative experiential youth work place Brathay ideally to address this issue. Brathay’s increased use of impact in funding applications, and the rigour with which they can now describe their evaluation services is leading to an increase in funding, and is assisting Brathay to stay true to its values. The dilemma demonstrating the impact of interpretive humanistic youth work in a performative culture has been effectively addressed.

References:


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