Meeting at the Crossroads: Interactivity, Technology, and Evaluation Utilization

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Abstract: This article is a review and integration of evaluation utilization literature with a new focus on the use of technology to increase evaluation utility. Scholarship on evaluation utilization embodies one of the major and ongoing quandaries in the evaluation profession: What constitutes usefulness and relevance to stakeholders? We think that a constructivist lens is helpful in making sense of the trajectory this literature has taken, where what is “useful” and what culminates in “use” have become much more flexible notions that are in a constant state of negotiation between evaluators and evaluation stakeholders. We posit that it may be important for evaluators who are closely engaged with stakeholders to pay greater attention to this interactivity to build a common vision of what is “useful” at that moment in time. While this is no small task, we posit that evaluators may have something to gain by exploring the wealth of digital technologies and social media tools that are available. The use of these tools in local level, participatory-oriented contexts may be valuable for encouraging interactivity, potentially encouraging learning, creativity, and ownership. This article aims to stress that integrating technology into everyday evaluation practice, where possible, may ultimately enhance evaluation usefulness and relevance.

Keywords: digital technology and social media, evaluation use, interactivity, technology, utilization

Résumé: Cet article est une critique et une intégration de la littérature portant sur l’utilisation de l’évaluation. Il met un accent novateur sur l’utilisation de la technologie pour accroître l’utilité de l’évaluation. Les recherches sur l’utilisation de l’évaluation représentent l’un des importants dilemmes en cours dans le domaine de l’évaluation : qu’est-ce que les intervenants considèrent comme étant utile ou pertinent? Nous pensons qu’une approche constructiviste est utile pour donner un sens à la trajectoire de ce corpus, dans lequel ce qui est « utile » et ce qui évolue en « usage » sont devenus des notions plus flexibles, lesquelles sont continuellement renégociées par les évaluateurs et les parties intéressées. Nous postulons qu’il peut être important pour les évaluateurs travaillant étroitement avec les intervenants de porter une plus grande attention à cette interactivité afin de développer une vision commune de ce qui est « utile ». Nous postulons que, bien qu’il ne s’agisse pas d’une mince tâche, les évaluateurs pourraient tirer profit d’une exploration des innombrables technologies

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et des outils sociaux disponibles. L'utilisation de ces outils dans des contextes locaux axés sur la participation pourrait être utile pour encourager l'interactivité, ce qui pourrait encourager l'apprentissage, la créativité et l'appropriation. Cet article cherche à mettre l'accent sur le fait que l'intégration de la technologie dans la pratique quotidienne d'évaluation, lorsque possible, pourrait, finalement, améliorer l'utilité et la pertinence de l'évaluation.

Mots clés : technologies numériques et médias sociaux, utilisation de l'évaluation, interactivité, technologie, utilisation

Evaluation can be a costly and time-intensive exercise but, despite these investments, knowledge emerging from evaluation does not always influence decision-making or practice (Neuman, Shahor, Shina, Sarid, & Saar, 2013). Over the years, the somewhat troubling implication that fruits of evaluation labour end on dusty shelves has incited a strong response from the evaluation community. Dating back to the mid 1970s, or what Henry and Mark (2003) and others refer to as the “golden age” of research on evaluation use, much energy has been invested in uncovering just what ultimately makes evaluation useful to its clients and stakeholders. Previously, characteristics such as credibility, relevance, and effective communication (Cousins & Leithwood, 1986; Leviton & Hughes, 1981) have all been identified as being key factors explaining utilization, some even becoming embodied in the standards for professional practice such as the Program Evaluation Standards of the Joint Committee on Standards for Education Evaluation (Yarbrough, Shulha, Hopson, & Caruthers, 2011). Another important influence—the “personal factor”—was identified by Patton and associates long ago (Patton et al., 1977) and centred quite directly on the relationship between evaluators and stakeholders. Although the search for factors that contribute to use has waned over the years, prominent contemporary approaches such as “developmental evaluation” (Patton, 2011) stress that flexibility and relationship building arising from interactivity between the evaluators and program community stakeholders may be essential to use. Viewed from this perspective, what evaluators see as “usefulness” exists in a specific time and place, and therefore should not carry the expectation of being generalizable across contexts (Weiss, 1998), or even sustainable once the evaluation project is completed.

This emphasis on flexibility has strong implications for how future program evaluators will approach utilization. Our work and research is becoming increasingly situated in a fast-paced world where digital technologies and social media continue to gain prevalence. Given the growing emphasis on social networking and communication at a peer-to-peer level, the implications for evaluation practice may be profound; however, the use of these media as tools to achieve usefulness so far appears to be almost absent from evaluation literature. The availability of these new channels presents an opportunity for new forms of creative stakeholder engagement, yet it also presents a formidable challenge. Unless technology allows for sufficient interactivity between evaluators and stakeholders, we
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miss the opportunity to transform information into valuable knowledge (Galen & Grodzicki, 2011), and the technology becomes an added burden. Nevertheless, to ensure that the evaluation field is not left behind, the potential of these tools must be thoroughly explored.

This article thus focuses on three distinct objectives. In the first of these, we discuss key theories surrounding use—mainly literature on utilization evaluation (instrumental, conceptual, symbolic) and process use—to understand how evaluators have to date viewed “usefulness” or “utility.” Second, we review how constructivist thought has shifted the nature of this discussion away from identifying specific attributes such as relevance, timeliness, or evaluator credibility to instead focusing on flexibility and the importance of contextual factors. Here, we offer our own reflections and, drawing on recent knowledge mobilization literature, propose that interactivity in communication between evaluators and key stakeholders is what may be at the root of flexibility. Lastly, we invite future researchers to consider how we can increase interactivity in evaluation, and discuss the extent to which technology and social media may contribute to the relevancy of our field, ensuring greater engagement of those for whom our evaluations are conducted.

DEFINING USEFUL EVALUATIONS

Before embarking on a discussion of what use may mean to evaluators now, it is worthwhile to briefly discuss how it has been conceptualized to date. In this section, we will present a synthesis of literature focused on utilization evaluation, first defining important concepts and then summarizing what factors or predictors of achieving use in practice have been highlighted in the literature.

Over the last several decades, scholars interested in utilization of evaluation and, later, process use theories have produced rich theoretical discussions. With its roots stemming from an interest in utilization of social research in federal programs, the earliest article on evaluation utilization was an article published by Weiss in 1967 (Weiss, 1998). Since then, the pursuit for utility has been a recurring theme at the heart of this vast body of literature. However, just what constitutes “useful evaluation” appears to still be contested. Rather than adopting a single definition, evaluation theorists agreed that use can manifest itself in a variety of ways, and began to categorize its various meanings with the hopes that this will eventually create a more comprehensive understanding of the concept (Shulha & Cousins, 1997). By 1986, these categories included instrumental, conceptual, and symbolic use of evaluation findings or results, with “process use” being added as a category in the late 1990s (Patton, 1997). In the following section we provide a very brief overview of each of these categories.

Instrumental use occurs when the program or policy goes through substantial changes as a result of the evaluation, and these effects are clear and visible (Neuman et al., 2013). These changes predominantly originate from findings reports, recommendations and lessons learned, and other documents produced at the end of the evaluation (Forss, Rebien, & Carlsson, 2002). Instrumental use
implies a somewhat linear process, and is presumably achieved when findings are noncontroversial, the proposed changes are small-scale, and the organizational environment is stable (Ashley, 2009; Best & Holmes, 2010; Weiss, 1998). The second type of use, conceptual use, relates to wider changes in understandings and attitudes of the program community members, but an absence of demonstrable change at the program level. What may occur instead is a discussion on possible future directions a program may take in the future, or a production of “lessons learned” (Patton, 2001). By engaging with evaluation findings, stakeholders not only further their understanding of what their program is meant to accomplish, but also gain an insight as where its strengths and weaknesses lie (Neuman et al., 2013; Weiss, 1998). Symbolic use occurs when there is support to undertake an evaluation without any real intent to make use of its findings (Patton, 2008).

In contrast to these categories of use of findings, process use is a more recent development in evaluation utilization theory (Shulha & Cousins, 1997), stressing the importance of stakeholder involvement and learning during the various stages of evaluation (Patton, 1998). Although the term was initially coined by Patton (1997), the idea of learning as a benefit of evaluation to stakeholders became a recurring theme in evaluation throughout the late 1990s (Preskill & Caracelli, 1997), and vestiges of process use have been evident in research on evaluation use since the 1980s (Amo & Cousins, 2007). Unlike the previous categories, process use may emerge in a variety of ways, ranging from skill development (Patton, 1998) to the creation of shared understanding (Forss et al., 2002; Taut, 2008). It may take place at an individual, group, or organizational level (Amo & Cousins, 2007; DeLuca et al., 2009; Preskill & Caracelli, 1997), and may concern participants’ operational, theoretical, or symbolic understanding (DeLuca et al., 2009; Weaver & Cousins, 2004). From this perspective, final report findings are not as important as the lessons an organization or group of stakeholders grasp through the process of engaging with evaluation. The benefits of process use are also presumed to be long-lasting, outweighing that of a recommendation report, which can quickly lose its timeliness to policymakers (Patton, 1998). What sets this category apart from the others is its emphasis on “learning how to learn” (Patton, 1998, p. 226). This means that even if there is no immediate use at the level of policymaking, the interaction and the learning gained by participating in evaluation are still able to benefit managers or program staff that took part in those activities. Furthermore, rather than giving participants an evaluator-written final report containing information and recommendations constructed as “valid knowledge,” process use may instill in a program a culture that promotes analytically derived decision-making (Preskill et al., 2003). This suggests that participants get a chance to closely experience evaluation, arrive at their own conclusions, and construct their own knowledge (Preskill et al., 2003), as we will discuss in greater detail below. In practice, these categories of use of findings (instrumental, conceptual, symbolic) and process use are not mutually exclusive, as there can be considerable overlap among them (Shulha & Cousins, 1997). For instance, it is possible that users whose program is faced with financial constraints are not
immediately able to make instrumental changes to the program’s functioning; however, their changes in attitude toward program components plant the seed for future decision-making (Neuman et al., 2013; Weiss, 1998). Similarly, the learning that takes place throughout the evaluation (process use), whether through data collection and analysis or other evaluation-related tasks, can indirectly shed light on the program’s shortcomings (conceptual use), and eventually lead to concrete modification (instrumental use).

Although scholars are now able to articulate what evaluation “use” may resemble in practice, understandings of how to reach this state and what factors are essential are not yet fully formed. In the following section we examine the various issues surrounding factors driving use, and offer some of our own reflections.

FROM FIXED TO FLUID: FACTORS INFLUENCING USE

The previous section outlined four types of use that can be achieved by evaluation, but what has puzzled evaluators for the past several decades and continues to puzzle them is determining which factors may lead to tangible realization of these uses. A systematic review of 65 evaluation studies by Cousins and Leithwood (1986) determined that factors driving successful use were mainly implementation- or context-related. Implementation-related factors deal largely with the day-to-day tasks of evaluation, and included such criteria as “evaluation quality, credibility, relevance, communication, the findings themselves, and the timeliness of evaluations for users” (p. 359). Some of the factors identified in this study, such as credibility, relevance, effective communication, and timeliness, have even become incorporated into program evaluation standards that help guide evaluation practice (Yarbrough et al., 2011). On the other hand, context-related factors take into consideration the circumstances surrounding a particular exercise, and comprise “information needs of users, decision characteristics, political climate, competing information, personal characteristics of users, and user commitment and receptiveness to evaluation information” (Cousins & Leithwood, 1986, p. 359). At the time, the data emerging from the chosen studies pointed to evaluation methods characteristics—such as quality, sophistication, and intensity—as the most persuasive factors of use (Shulha & Cousins, 1997). Given the continued interest in the subject, other scholars have continued to build on this existing knowledge and contributed to this evolving body of literature. In 1988, the famous Weiss-Patton debate focused on questioning to what degree usefulness is the evaluator’s responsibility, with Weiss (1988a, 1988b) arguing that utility is outside the evaluator’s realm of control, and Patton (1988) stating that it is the evaluator’s obligation. Smith & Chircop (1989) noted that these disagreements arose because the authors were referencing two distinct types of evaluation: “Weiss is talking about national, broad-scale evaluations, while Patton is considering local, smaller-scale studies, or . . . Weiss is focusing on policy evaluation and Patton on program evaluation” (p. 6). Although both authors disregarded these claims (Smith & Chircop, 1989), it sheds light on an important distinction that use may manifest in different ways.
based on scope. By 1997, myriad new conditions, such as “anticipated degree of program change” and “perceived value of evaluation as management tool,” were added as potential predictors of use (Shulha & Cousins, 1997). Whether the evaluation was conducted by an internal or an external evaluator was also cited as having a role (Love, 1993, 1998). Internal evaluators are said to be more aware of their organization’s informational needs and thus may have a better notion of what is useful (Love, 1993). Love (1998) wrote:

[E]ffective internal evaluation units demonstrated top management support for evaluation, positive leadership by the head of the internal evaluation unit, and an organizational culture that supported continual learning and critical program review. Another important factor was adaptation by the internal evaluation unit to the culture and decision-making style of the organization. Finally, effective internal evaluation units were proactive and had a highly visible public image in the organization, which they achieved by soliciting topics for evaluation, promoting the results of evaluations, and using evaluations for program improvement. (p. 149)

Love (1998), Mathison (2011), and Volkov and Baron (2011) also noted that interpersonal relationships within the organizational structure determined the effectiveness of these units; hence, their ability to produce useful results hinged on those relationships.

Other authors (Forss et al., 2002; Preskill et al., 2003; Weiss, 1998) identified “active user involvement” and “effective communication” as factors most likely to lead to use, while Grasso (2003) noted the importance of “meeting clients’ information needs” by tailoring the final report to the many audiences. As a result of these contributions, the current version of the Program Evaluation Standards of the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation now incorporates additional guiding criteria for practice, such as attention to stakeholders, negotiated purposes based on the needs of stakeholders, explicit values emerging from personal and cultural differences, meaningful processes, and concern for consequences and influence of the evaluation (Yarbrough et al., 2011).

From this overview, we can say that finding a single, adaptable predictor of use that can work across contexts is not viable. This, in many ways, is unsurprising, given the number of existing evaluation approaches and the vast variety of clients and interpersonal networks that exist within them (Best & Holmes, 2010; Contandriopoulos & Brouselle, 2012; Weiss, 1988a, 1988b). Authors began to note that having a “check list” of characteristics was inferior to customizing evaluation designs according to contextual characteristics (Contandriopoulos & Brouselle, 2012; Leviton, 2003; Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Preskill & Caracelli, 1997; Patton, 2008; Shulha & Cousins, 1997), saliency of the issue, and range of audiences (Grasso, 2003). As Patton (2011) noted, “there are no absolute rules an evaluation can follow to know what to do with specific users in a specific situation” (p. 15). This approach thus carries a simple but powerful message: there is no single way to conduct an evaluation and, likewise, no single recipe for success.
Having provided this overview, we will now discuss the philosophical transition from seeing “use” as a fixed state to be achieved via a single path, to a spectrum dependant on evaluation knowledge co-creation.

**EVALUATION USE THROUGH A CONSTRUCTIVIST LENS: FLEXIBILITY AND INTERACTIVITY**

The review of evaluation use literature presented in the last section implies that many of the theoretical underpinnings of program evaluation went through an epistemological shift away from single notions of “use” and “utility” to a broader recognition that use can be manifested in a variety of ways. Similarly, the view that predictors of use are not homogeneous signifies an important shift toward the broader recognition that evaluation knowledge in itself can be quite varied and context-derived (Shulha & Cousins, 1997; Weiss, 1998). In the context of this field, we think that constructivist evaluation theory such as that developed by Guba and Lincoln (1995) can be a useful lens for understanding the journey program evaluation has taken over the last several decades. At the heart of the constructivist view of evaluation is the argument that any knowledge will develop as a source of “competing social-psychological constructions that are often multiple, uncertifiable, constantly problematic and changing” (Stufflebeam, 2008, p. 1394). In his review of social constructivism, Kim (2001) notes that constructivist thinkers such as Au (1998), Ernest (1999), Gredler (1997), and Prat & Floden (1994) view knowledge as something in a state of becoming—a man-made product—rather than something that is rooted in objective fact. Instead, knowledge itself is a transient, cyclical process where what we create influences the created, and in turn the created serves as the foundation for future negotiation and meaning-building. In essence, this means that knowledge is not finite but a temporary and “gradual accommodation” of ideas that manages to achieve “relative fit” (von Glasersfeld, 2005, p. 6).

When viewed from a constructivist standpoint, users of evaluation do not just absorb new information without first seeing how this information concurs or conflicts with existing knowledge and the wider political and interpersonal relationships within the organization (Leviton, 2003; Weiss, 1988a, 1988b). Evaluation thus fuses together different perspectives to create a new, unique form of knowledge that has meaning in the distinct conditions of that unique context (Guba & Lincoln, 1995; Leviton, 2003; Weiss, 1998).

We reviewed the criteria of implementation-based and context-based factors identified by Cousins and Leithwood (1986) and Shulha and Cousins (1997) from a constructivist standpoint. By our donning constructivist glasses, it becomes apparent that very few of these elements are truly within the control of the evaluator. Instead, we presume that every factor would have parallel spectra—that which is based on the perceptions of the evaluator, and that which is influenced by the perspectives of the program community stakeholders. For instance, notions such as quality, credibility, relevance, or timeliness are highly subjective, and are arguably...
influenced by the specific context and particular point in time. Credibility may be improved by making the evaluation rigorous through triangulation techniques, but, much like relevance, it is based on ‘perceptual dimensions that are very much influenced by users’ pre-existing opinions and preferences’ (Contandriopoulos & Brousselle, 2012, p. 65; see also Chelimsky, 2007). Even before becoming involved in an evaluation, clients may already have an idea as to the extent of their information needs and how relevant the exercise will be for the organization (Contandriopoulos & Brousselle, 2012). Users’ knowledge structures are complex in that they are influenced by many considerations at both interpersonal and collective levels (Leviton, 2003). This is also the case with overall opinions of evaluation and its value as a management tool. Lastly, given their intimate knowledge of the program activities, stakeholders may foresee what changes will or will not be feasible. They may oppose recommendations if the messages they contain run contrary to their beliefs, and therefore will be resistant to using the evaluation (Contandriopoulos & Brousselle, 2012).

This is not to say that these factors cannot be influenced—on the contrary, process use promotes this point quite extensively. Clients’ perceptions of the evaluation utility, the program or intervention, or even of themselves as actors within the process are not fixed points along a spectrum. Instead, if we draw on constructivist evaluation theory, we can conceptualize that these perceptions are continually influenced by time, and multiple and competing sources of influence (Stufflebeam, 2008). In other words, how the evaluator and stakeholders see use will change in response to change in conditions. For example, if we imagine that a shift of organizational priorities led by a key stakeholder happens concurrently, evaluation recommendations may be changed before they are implemented, or even discarded altogether. Similarly, participants may experience considerable transformation with respect to how they conceptually view their program, but on an individual level, when determining future direction, each participant may also rely on prior knowledge and past work experiences (Leviton, 2003). As an outsider, the external evaluator may have quite a different point of view, and may not necessarily see the value in these ideas (Leviton, 2003). Scholars such as Contandriopoulos and Brousselle (2012) and Cooper and Levin (2010) stress that knowledge is co-created, re-created, and enmeshed. Ottoson (2009) summarized all these complex dimensions in the following definition:

Knowledge in some form (ideas, innovation, skills, or policy) moves in some direction (laterally, hierarchically, spreads, or exchanges) among various stakeholders (knowledge producers, end users, or intermediaries) and contexts (national, community, or organizational) to achieve some outcomes (intended benefits, unanticipated outcomes, or hijacked effects). (Ottoson, 2009, p. 8, emphasis in the original)

Given the amount of interconnection implied by this definition, we would like to propose that no matter how much time the evaluator dedicates to perfecting the implementation design, without a certain synergy, the effectiveness of these strategies will reflect only one end of the spectrum—that of the evaluator. If
stakeholders are not sufficiently involved in the evaluation that they can actively engage with the information with which they are presented, and do not have an opportunity to question the emerging data, it may be difficult to create this middle ground, and neither instrumental, conceptual, or symbolic use of findings, nor process uses may be effectively achieved. We think that the notion of evaluators inhabiting complex adaptive systems (Patton, 2011) is an important one, and it is not contradictory to constructivist theories of evaluation in a sense that, to respond to the fickle nature of these systems, evaluators must be flexible (Patton, 2011) and strive to build a common view of what evaluation use may mean for that particular context. To build this common view, there is clearly a need for ongoing interactivity—a process of engagement and knowledge co-construction between evaluators and potential users of evaluation they work with. Without interactivity, we are once again left to, as Weiss (1998, p. 32) put it, “keep fingers crossed that audiences pay attention.” This means that to reach a unified plateau, two (or more) parallel spectra should shift depending on the level of mutual communication and interactivity, as well as the level of learning throughout the evaluation process until, ideally, there is an overlap based on mutually built meanings. Stakeholders and evaluators are assumed to be under the influence of a variety of factors, but they are also highly influenced by one another. These interactions in turn affect their perceptions of how evaluation may be useful. In other words, if this knowledge is always in the state of “becoming” (Nutley, Walter, & Davies, 2003), it suggests that that evaluators’ perceptions of what is useful may (and arguably, should) change, lest fixed knowledge becomes an unmoving cog in an otherwise turning machine. Ultimately, the flexibility that comes from shifting one’s perception and being open to reconstruction of knowledge is very much in line with the flexibility that Patton (1988, 2011) and others have identified as a key factor in utilization.

We realize that what we have outlined above may be at odds with the reality that some evaluators experience, especially if their work takes place in a policy-oriented world where evaluation is guided by deadlines, predetermined objectives, or even design guidelines (Chelimsky, 2007; Ginsburg & Rhett, 2003). Grasso (2003) pointed out that there is usually a wide range of audiences, from the funding entity that requested the evaluation to the managers and program staff, and each of these stakeholders have their own information needs and unique ideas as to what is useful. Meeting the needs of all these groups is nigh impossible. In those cases, we recognize that knowledge co-creation and interactivity may be seen as a “lofty goal” that is at odds with “what actually happens” (Sridharan, 2003, p. 483). Therefore, we think that the interactivity approach makes the most sense in participatory-oriented and developmental evaluation contexts, or in contexts where the evaluator is working closely with managers or program staff who have exhibited a willingness to engage. These stakeholders may be the individuals who are most likely to employ the evaluation’s findings and recommendations (Grasso, 2003) or to benefit from the process.

Evaluation is a field increasingly situated in a world that is fast-paced and ever-changing. However, an optimist would assert that this new age is more open
to flexibility and creativity in our profession. As we continue to build networks and communities of practice and to engage diverse stakeholders, digital technologies and social media can be tools of great value, as the following section will aim to show.

THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY AS A MEDIUM FOR PROMOTING INTERACTIVITY AND FOSTERING UTILIZATION

Given the deeply complex relationships that occur in evaluation, what may be the value of integrating technology into the evaluation toolkit? With respect to instrumental use, systems that make data widely available in a clear and understandable format, whenever or wherever it is needed, may help the program staff to utilize evaluation findings or build upon them (BenMoussa, 2010). Similarly, using tools such as forums, blogs, and social media in conjunction with concept mapping software (such as Coggle, XMind, and Popplet) can advance an organization’s shared understanding of what the program is meant to achieve, thus drawing out users’ mental models (Leviton, 2003) and fostering conceptual use. Lastly, technology can assist with process use by giving evaluators tools to better engage their stakeholders in core evaluation activities such as concept mapping, theory of change modelling, data gathering, and analysis (when those activities are a priority).

With respect to stakeholder involvement, communication technologies may help to facilitate inclusion, as well as allow for persistent and sustained contact between members of the evaluation team. Communication technologies have the potential to overcome these barriers or, at the very least, lessen this disconnection felt by users who are not able to engage with the rest of the team due to distance (BenMoussa, 2010). GoogleVoice and Skype are platforms for Internet communication, and are compatible with data recording and transcription add-ons that are available at minimal cost (Clementz, 2012). Online bulletin board focus group platforms are another way to include technology in the evaluation process, as many of these tools (such as itracks, for example) are both quantitative and qualitative while also embedding social media directly into the application. Other tools such as Padlet allow for both synchronous and asynchronous document and multimedia sharing, giving a group of collaborators an intuitive virtual space. The Padlet platform allows a great amount of customization, from making the space fully public and shareable in a variety of formats, to serving as a private workspace where stakeholders can provide feedback in a confidential manner. This space can be used for the sharing of ideas and brainstorming, and as a database of related project documents (Kistler, 2014). It can also be an excellent option for providing quick or even real-time feedback and preliminary data findings.

The primary benefit of including such tools in one’s practice is that without the ongoing communication among users, positive relationship building and knowledge creation risk running out of steam and becoming sporadic rather than sustained (Preskill et al., 2003; Telfair & Leviton, 1999). There are also additional
benefits, such as the reduction of costs so often associated with participatory and collaborative evaluation approaches by allowing the evaluation team and participants to communicate while also saving valuable time. Data visualization tools such as infographic makers (such as Padlet, Infogr.am, and Visual.ly, among many others) or digital storytelling tools (such as Steller and Storehouse) can also help us to offer our findings in formats different from the traditional final report or executive summary. This is beneficial for interacting with a range of audiences who may have different levels of comfort when it comes to evaluation (Grasso, 2003). Visual tools like those above entice these stakeholders to engage with the data in new and creative ways. As an added benefit, infographics and digital stories can also be shared, which is an attractive prospect for evaluators who hope the findings will reach a wider audience.

As we discussed before, interactivity should in theory be less about disseminating “valid” findings and more about arriving at a common understanding. By using these tools, we posit that the evaluator’s role becomes that of a facilitator who is not unwilling to challenge his or her own mental models of what constitutes “useful” for that particular group of stakeholders.

It is now time for an obligatory word of caution. Perhaps of critical importance is that evaluators ought to consider ethical ramifications of using technology and social media, and ensure that using these tools does not impinge on guidelines for ethical conduct. This may include taking the time to assess any possible risks to stakeholders and taking the necessary precautions to safeguard data and participant identities.

Yet another consideration is the degree to which the integration of these tools is congruent with the evaluation context. Despite some of the advanced systems such as SharePoint and other collaborative knowledge software, evaluator and participant perceptions may be deeply influenced by processes that are not so easily mapped by the tools we have at our disposal today. There is a challenge in facilitating verbal information without the natural supplementation of physical gestures and nonverbal cues (Andres, 2011) that we are so used to. To circumvent this challenge, research on what may be key to successful virtual teamwork (DeRosa, 2011) suggested that commencing the teamwork with a face-to-face meeting can be important, as is ensuring that virtual teamwork happens on a regular basis. Also, we are seeing more and more tools, such as VoiceThread, that allow for virtual dialogue via digital audio and video. We believe that these tools will become more widespread as this kind of technology develops.

Lastly, if knowledge mobilization research is any indication, building websites and forums does not necessarily mean that users will make use of these technologies (Cooper & Levin, 2010; Nutley et al., 2003). In other words, technology may be a tool that eases interactivity, but it should not be an added burden; thus, we posit that it ought to be used as little or as much as the evaluation context demands. The use of these technologies must be a negotiated process that involves the stakeholders; however, having access to a multitude of different platforms and allowing clients to engage with evaluation in fun and creative ways can
undoubtedly improve the utilization of results and improve ownership. Thus, evaluators should not be afraid to experiment with technology, and discover the balance that makes sense for them.

Various resources are now available to evaluators interested in integrating technology into their practice. One of these resources, the American Evaluation Association 365 Blog (http://aea365.org/blog/), commonly lists useful resources and makes suggestions for how evaluators can make use of new tools and social media to improve their work. Another, a tool titled “Harnessing Collaborative Technology,” lists several useful technologies based on the desired function (such as “learning,” “building community and trust,” and “assessing progress and results,” among others), rates their ease of use, and makes suggestions for what technology may be optimal based on the size of the collaboration. Although this tool was designed by GrantCraft (2015) for the philanthropy sector, we think that many of these technologies could also be integrated into evaluation practice, and we invite practitioners to make use of this resource.

As an example, we have begun to use infographics as a mode of sharing data findings with stakeholders in a multiyear government-funded evaluation project. In our case, qualitative data were coded and analyzed, and the preliminary findings were aggregated in a visual form using Piktochart templates and the colour scheme of the organization we were working with. We found that this approach was positively received, and the stakeholders responded to the data with both curiosity and interest. Rather than reading a long midway report, we provided them with an alternate way of interacting with the findings, one that we believe yielded a greater degree of engagement on their part. At the present time, there is also willingness to incorporate the findings in this format into the organization’s impact report. Other potential uses for technology within the context of this project may include the use of XMind for mapping users’ mental models related to what aspects of the project were helpful. Lastly, we hope to use a digital storytelling tool like Steller to capture the lessons learned along the way; this can be co-constructed with our partners and shared with the project funder.

In closing, research on the use of technology in evaluation practice (Jamieson & Azzam, 2012) demonstrated that there is already interest in technology, at least with respect to tools such as those for e-mail, survey development, and digital collection. However, we believe that integrating a wider range of technologies such as those mentioned above could be the next step forward, and a valuable stride in the ongoing professionalization of evaluation. Only by actively using these tools can we begin to learn what works and does not work, under what conditions, and in what ways technology facilitates the interactivity that we believe is of such inherent value to evaluation use.

**CONCLUSION**

The fear that evaluation findings will end on a dusty shelf continues to permeate the field, and arguments for more “use”—including conceptual use, instrumental use, symbolic use of evaluation findings, and process use—continue to feature...
prominently in evaluation literature (Leeuw, 2009). Numerous studies through the years have aimed to determine what factors can lead to useful evaluations, though it appears that scholars have yet to reach consensus. Concepts of utilization, impact, uptake, and so on continue to be explored and redefined at the same time, challenging our understanding of what it means to engage in evaluation as both producers (and coproducers) and users of evaluation knowledge. Owing to the constructivist theories of Guba and Lincoln (1995), there has also been an undeniable transition away from thinking of utilization as a combination of a few key ingredients, to a view that contextual and human factors and allowing for flexibility may be the provisional answers we are looking for (Contandriopoulos & Brousselle, 2012; Leviton, 2003; Patton, 1988; Preskill & Caracelli, 1997; Shulha & Cousins, 1997).

Building on this epistemological standpoint and linking it to Patton's recent work on developmental approaches to evaluation, we argued that neither evaluator nor stakeholder perceptions of utility are objective nor permanent. It also seems evident that linear communication models seldom lead to effective knowledge use (Contandriopoulos & Brousselle, 2012; Cooper & Levin, 2010; Weiss, 1998). Instead, knowledge building evolves in a flexible and situational manner. From these viewpoints, we argue that achieving use is more likely by ensuring that the evaluation process is interactive. Without interaction, how evaluators see usefulness represents only one spectrum of ideas—that of the evaluator. Emphasizing interactivity does not devalue the role of context, a characteristic that, as we tried to demonstrate, is often emphasized in program evaluation literature. Contextual characteristics and process use can turn the tide of an evaluation, but making evaluation interactive challenges us to question and redefine what we see as useful. Naturally, what the evaluator may find is that interactions with users immersed in context can lead to change in their own perceptions, thereby also ensuring flexibility.

Lastly, we suggest that there is value in exploring technology as a possible way to foster interactivity and build bridges of consensus. It must not be framed as a miracle solution, or aim to turn evaluation into “E-valuation,” and while it goes without saying that fluidity of interaction cannot be easily replaced by technology, it can certainly augment it. Technology is meant to add value rather than replace key interpersonal dynamics, as the nature of these dynamics, for the time being, cannot be reproduced by an algorithm. Instead, ongoing adaptation and negotiation are demanded.

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