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ABSTRACT

Few studies exist on the impact of practical participatory evaluation when the evaluator is not only a member of the organization, but also has program knowledge and expertise. This paper addresses this gap in the literature by reporting on a 2.5-year longitudinal single case study of practical participatory evaluation of a national, publicly funded training organization. Drawing on multiple sources of qualitative data, the study investigates the effects of an internal evaluator who was both employed by the organization and internal to the program being evaluated. Results show that the added dimensions of evaluator knowledge of both program and organizational content can have a powerful impact on developing the organization's capacity to inquire systematically and to learn. The study also demonstrates the differential effects on various sub-processes and strategies associated with the organizational learning construct. (Contains 37 references.) (Author/SLD)

Internal Participatory Evaluation as an Organizational Learning System: A Longitudinal Case Study

by

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ABSTRACT

Internal Participatory Evaluation as an Organizational Learning System: A Longitudinal Case Study

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Basic Message of Presentation

Over the past few decades our knowledge about how and why evaluation data are used has expanded considerably. This knowledge prompted the development of a practical form of collaborative inquiry called "participatory evaluation." While participatory evaluation has been demonstrated to enhance the utilization of specific evaluation results, it also has great potential for stimulating the development of organizational learning capacity. However, organizations have been slow to embrace methods of systematic inquiry such as program evaluation and only a small number of studies have looked at the effects of evaluation on the capacity of organizations to learn.

It would seem that internal evaluators, given their position within organizations and expertise with the entity being evaluated, would be ideally suited to conducting practical participatory evaluation. But the research looking at the participatory approach as an organizational intervention has emerged predominantly from situations where the evaluator is external to the program being evaluated. Few studies exist that show the impact of practical participatory evaluation when the evaluator is not only a member of the organization, but also has program knowledge and expertise.

This paper addresses this gap in the literature by reporting on a two and one-half year longitudinal single case study of practical participatory evaluation of a national, publicly funded training organization. In particular, the paper examines one of the key dimensions of organizational learning, levels of learning. Key questions addressed include:

- Can practical participatory forms of evaluation cause organization members to question basic organizational assumptions?
- Does involvement in participatory evaluation impact the organization beyond the scope of the evaluation project itself?

Drawing on multiple sources of qualitative data, the authors show that quite significant organizational effects can result from such an intervention. These findings add value to prior research in this area that has revealed only low-level or "single loop" learning effects.

Implication to Practice or Theory

An important feature of the current study is the distinction that was made regarding which type of internal evaluator the present study's author fulfilled. A conventional definition of an internal evaluator is someone employed by the organization and who conducts evaluation with program personnel. The present study investigated the effects of an internal evaluator who was both employed by the organization and internal to the program being evaluated. The study's findings do offer some insights regarding this issue. For example, the study shows that the added dimensions of evaluator knowledge of both the program and organizational context can have a powerful impact on developing the organization's capacity to inquire systematically and to learn.

The paper also contributes to the organizational learning research knowledge base by demonstrating the differential effects on various sub-processes and strategies associated with the organizational learning construct. Finally, the findings provide researchers and practitioners with useful knowledge about the circumstances under which internal participatory evaluation is likely to be effective.

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Internal Participatory Evaluation as an Organizational Learning System: A Longitudinal Case Study

Contemporary evaluators and evaluation scholars have come to understand the power and potential of alternative, particularly collaborative forms of evaluation, in enhancing the utility of program evaluation. Recent surveys of evaluators on such matters (Cousins, Donohue & Bloom, 1996; Preskill & Caracelli, 1997) have confirmed that this group perceives quite significant impact on program practitioners and the organizations within which they work of evaluation approaches that directly embrace the involvement of evaluation stakeholders. Such impact may be directly attributable to the findings of the evaluation in terms of support for discrete program decision making (instrumental use) or enhanced understanding and learning about program processes and effects (conceptual use). When stakeholder involvement in collaborative evaluation is substantial and long-lasting, quite enormous effects can also be attributed to evaluation implementation. This is what Patton (1997) termed "process use" or "individual changes in thinking and behavior, and program or organizational changes in procedures and culture, that occur among those involved in evaluation as a result of the learning that occurs during the evaluation." (p. 90).

Process use at the individual level is manifest in the acquisition and development among program practitioners and participants of knowledge and skills associated with systematic inquiry and evaluation logic. These abilities, it can be argued, may then be utilized in other aspects of the roles of program designers and implementers. Regardless, they are likely to extend beyond the particular program that serves as the focus for evaluation (Shulha & Cousins, 1997). Evaluation effects independent of the findings of evaluation can also be observed at the organizational level. Recently, many evaluators and evaluation theorists have written about the role that evaluation plays in fostering organizational learning (Cousins, 1998; Cousins & Earl, 1992, 1995; Jenlink, 1994; Owen & Lambert, 1995; Preskill & Torres, 1998; Torres, Preskill & Piotnek, 1996). Although Preskill and Caracelli (1997) differentiate the terms, organizational learning may be conceived to be an instance of process use at the organizational, as opposed to individual, level.

Despite the recent practical and scholarly interest in the relationship between evaluation and organizational learning, research-based knowledge in support of this connection is limited. Forss, Cracknell and Samset (1994) conducted a retrospective study of several European evaluations and found only limited, incremental or "single-loop" organizational effects. They question evaluation's potential to precipitate deeper, more penetrating or "double-loop" organizational changes such as how organizational members view the world and take collective action. Studies in the collection edited by Cousins and Earl (1995) examined the effects of participatory evaluation on utilization and organizational learning. This collection of retrospective case studies provided very limited evidence of double-loop organizational learning. The editors concluded that evaluation-prompted changes to organizational culture are only likely to be in evidence after sustained engagement of organizational personnel in evaluation activities. Cousins (1999) differentiated organizational process use effects at various levels within a school district. He investigated effects at the level of the research team, the secondary school in which participatory project was implemented, the district central board office and other schools within the district. Although some effects were observable. The author also concluded that sustained evaluation activity within the district would be required in order to stimulate substantial changes in organizational culture.

Despite the promise that collaborative forms of evaluation can act as an organizational learning system to facilitate the transfer and integration of knowledge and "learning" from the individual to the organization, evidence supporting this claim remains thin. This may be the case for two reasons. First, extant empirical investigations in the domain tend to be retrospective case studies or wider quantitative surveys of evaluation practice. This, in spite of our longheld understanding that longitudinal research designs are likely to be the most productive means of studying evaluation

utilization (Cousins & Leithwood, 1986). Second, the psycho-social construct 'organizational learning' is very complex, ill-defined, and thus difficult to measure (Argyris, 1993). Given our current limited understanding of the construct, a qualitative case study approach would be the preferred mode of inquiry. Thus, the purpose of the present study is to examine the relationship between evaluation and organizational learning having taken both of these deficiencies into account. The investigation is a single case study of a national Canadian training organization that implemented a comprehensive internal participatory evaluation of its programs over a protracted period of time. The study was guided by two basic questions. (1) What are the consequences of internal participatory evaluation on organizational learning capacity? (2) What factors explain the extent to which these consequences occurred?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework guiding the study appears in diagrammatic form in Figure 1. The first consideration is the context in or *organizational frame* within which learning capacity is embedded. Anderson's (1982) framework for organizational climate serves as a useful heuristic perspective of organizational factors likely to influence organizational learning capacity. Her framework divides climate into four subcomponents: (1) *ecology,* or human relationships to the physical and material aspects of the organization; (2) *milieu*, a psycho-social dimension concerned with the presence of persons or groups and their characteristics; (3) *social system*, or patterned relationships among persons and groups; and (4) *culture*, the belief systems, values, cognitive structures and mental models shared among organization members. A second source of influence, also represented in Figure 1, is the conditions and factors associated with the environment within which the organization exists. Environmental influences not only play a role in shaping the organizational frame, but they are affected by organizational actions. To that extent, the conceptual framework is non-recursive since the flow of influence is not unidirectional.

Organizational learning capacity is the dependent variable in the present study. The term "capacity" reflects both the dimensions of organizational learning, as well as the processes that act to facilitate its growth. In the present study three dimensions identified in the conceptual framework emerged as effects that were particularly sensitive to evaluation as an intervention. These were shared knowledge representation, organizational memory, and levels of learning. These three dimensions and the factors and/or processes that influenced their development are described in turn.

Shared knowledge representation. Although many approaches to the study of organizational learning have been based on theories of individual learning, organizational learning is more complex. As Fiol and Lyles (1985) states, "Though individual learning is important to organizational learning, organizational learning is not simply the sum of each member's learning" (p. 804). While the term "learning" remains essentially the same as in the individual case (i.e., to increase one's capacity to take effective action), the learning *process* increases in complexity and challenge as the learning involves a much larger group of diverse individuals (Kim, 1993). As such, shared knowledge representation in organizations acknowledges that understanding how individuals learn is at the core of understanding how organizations learn. Typically, decision-making processes and individual perspectives are stored collectively by organization members as images and maps or theories-of-action (Argyris & Schön, 1978), routines (Levitt & March, 1988), mental models (Senge, 1990), meaning structures (Dixon, 1994), or assumptions (Drucker, 1994). Mental models, for example, control what an individual pays attention to, how she interprets information and concrete experiences, and chooses to act. Thus, when different mental models or knowledge representations are scattered among organization members, "organizational learning disabilities" are likely to occur such as the inability to reach consensus on a particular strategy and take collective action (Senge, 1990). Conversely, when mental models are widely held or shared by organization members, the capacity for organizational learning is significant.

Levels of learning. Most theorists would agree that organizations vary in terms of the level of learning they experience. Learning can range from incremental, low-level or "single-loop" learning to high-level or "double-loop" learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Huber, 1991). Fiol and Lyles (1985) defined low-level learning as a phenomenon occurring within the existing organizational structure and its given sets of rules. Indicators or evidence that single-loop learning has occurred could include, for example, the minor adjustments and fine tuning of existing organizational decision-making processes. In this respect it is incremental. High-level or double-loop learning, on the other hand, is reflected in the alteration of the overall decision rules, norms, and beliefs of the organization. It occurs when individual mental models integrate with mental models held by other organization members to generate new collective theories of action. This integration depends on organization members exposing and challenging individual and organizational assumptions that are typically not available for public discourse (Argyris, 1993; Kim, 1993). Evidence to support the existence of double-loop learning could include organization members altering existing assumptions or perspectives that guide the organization and its programs. Thus, for double-loop learning to occur new collective perspectives or mental models must first be created, then codified and stored in the organization's memory. This, in turn, will result in long term impact on the organization in terms of future decision making and action (Simon, 1991).

Organizational memory. An important dimension of organizational learning is reflected in the organization's ability to organize, store and retrieve information (Levitt & March, 1988; Simon, 1991). Levitt and March (1988) described memory in terms of the various routines and frameworks which are developed by the organization to guide its behavior. Routines include the forms, rules, operating procedures, and technologies that drive the organization, whereas, the organizational frameworks contain the structure of beliefs, shared mental models, and culture that allow the organization to function efficiently day-to-day (e.g., survive turnover of key personnel). An organization's memory is critical to organizational learning for it houses the shared experiences and mental models valued by the collective for use in future situations. For example, they enable the organization to self-correct in response to environmental change or to transform itself in anticipation of a desired future (Dixon, 1994).

The processes that act to foster or inhibit organizational learning in organizations (e.g., action learning, knowledge generation and acquisitions, and interpretive systems) have received a good deal of attention in the literature (Drucker, 1992; Huber, 1991; Levitt & March, 1988). For the purpose of this paper, the central question to be addressed is how do these processes affect the establishment of shared knowledge and mental models, as well as their codification to the organization's memory? The assumption that knowledge is socially constructed (Bandura, 1986) helps to frame an answer. As discussed earlier, although members of the organization can learn individually, organizational learning occurs when these individual understandings are shared among organization members and memories are altered or acquired (Fiol & Lyles, 1985).

The learning system described in Figure 1 is internal, practical participatory evaluation. This learning system is generative rather than adaptive (Cousins, 1996; Huber, 1991; Senge, 1990) because it's primary function is to create new knowledge rather than acquire and adapt knowledge from the organization's environment. The likelihood that this evaluative approach will serve as an organizational learning system and assist with the transfer and integration of individual learning to the organization, is augmented by virtue of the collaborative processes at play – such integration occurs as a result of an intense participatory process. By participatory is meant, a trained evaluator working in partnership with members of the program community over an extended period of time to do an evaluation. In practical participatory evaluation (Cousins & Earl, 1995; Cousins & Whitmore, 1998) the evaluator normally brings to the partnership technical knowledge and expertise about systematic inquiry and evaluation logic. Program practitioners and other participants, on the other hand, bring knowledge of program logic and organizational culture and processes. In the present instance, the

evaluator was also internal to the organization within which the evaluation occurred and to the program which served as the object of evaluation. In this respect, the trained evaluator also had programmatic and organizational knowledge and expertise. Practical participatory evaluation generally locates as follows on three primary dimensions (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998). First, technical decision making about the evaluation is shared between the evaluator and the program practitioners. Second, program practitioners not trained in evaluation usually participate quite extensively in a full range of evaluation activities, and finally, participation is normally limited to primary users or program practitioners who are in a position to do something with the knowledge generated by the evaluation.

As mentioned above, two types of impact are to be expected from collaborative evaluation. First, such forms of inquiry are likely to enhance conceptual and instrumental consequences of evaluation by virtue of the process engendering a strong sense of ownership and deep understanding of observed findings. This we term use of evaluation findings. Second, and what will be the focus of this paper, participatory evaluation, by virtue of program practitioners' active involvement in the implementation of the evaluation is likely to enhance process use. This we represent as organizational learning: it is understood that such learning (i.e., double-loop) will result if individual learning and perspectives are effectively integrated into the organization.

METHOD

A longitudinal single case study design was used for the present exploratory research. This approach provided the flexibility to explore the functions and impact of internal participatory evaluation within a guiding framework tied to organizational learning. Qualitative methods designed to capitalize on the prior specifications of a conceptual framework were therefore selected for use.

Case Organization and Focus of Evaluation

The program selected for the study was an evaluation of a national leadership training program that is directed, funded, and implemented by a partnership of Canadian federal and provincial governments and national organizations in Canada. The first author was employed by the case organization (CNT) and had, as an explicit and significant part of his role, responsibility for the evaluation. Over a two-year period, the first author (fulfilling the role as the study's researcher) worked in partnership with members of the project's steering committee to design and implement a comprehensive evaluation plan which included a detailed job task analysis, needs assessment, and quantitative and qualitative data collection.

Data Collection

Retrospective reflections. The researcher systematically reviewed existing documents (e.g., minutes of meetings, position papers) and recorded on audiotape his reflections of previous discussions that pertained to the central issues of the present study. This was an important step for it established the evolutionary process which both the program and the organization had undergone prior to the initiation of the evaluation project.

Participant observation. Data were collected via participant observations during the evaluation as interesting or important events occurred. The observations were guided to some degree by the following questions: (1) what effect is the researcher having on the participatory process? (2) in what ways is the internal participatory process evolving? (3) what organizational impact is the internal participatory process having? and (4) what factors explain the observed impact? The observation notes were somewhat unstructured and recorded onto an audio-tape. Participant observations were collected up to and including the end of the evaluation project (April, 1997), that is, once evaluation data had been analyzed, recommendations formulated, and a final report prepared and disseminated throughout the country.

Interviews. During the evaluation project, 27 structured interviews were carried out with members of the evaluation project's steering committee (i.e., three interviews per committee member). One other interview was carried out with the organization's president to bring the total interviews to 28. Figure 2 provides an overview of the committee's membership.

An independent interviewer was used in order to obtain corroborating evidence while at the same time minimizing participant observer bias. As outlined earlier, the first author was employed by the case organization and had as an explicit part of his job the responsibility to facilitate the evaluation project. Given that the author simultaneously acted as both evaluator and academic researcher, the potential for bias needed to be countered. Thus, the present study employed an external, independent interviewer to implement this data collection method. The audio tapes were transcribed by an external support person as well.

It is important to note that neither the tapes nor the transcripts that resulted from the interviews were made available to the researcher until after the final rounds of interviews (i.e., following the completion of the evaluation project and release of its final report).

Archival data. The researcher collected records and documents that addressed specifically or provided a context for the phenomenon being observed. Archival evidence was collected from historical documents, as well as ongoing sources of information (e.g., minutes of meetings).

Focus group. A focus group interview was conducted with the respondents interviewed throughout the project approximately six months following the completion of the evaluation project. The focus group was led by the second author so as to minimize the intrusion of familiarity bias given the committee's working relationship to the first author. The primary purpose of the focus group was to collect information that represented the group's (i.e., Planning and Evaluation Committee) perspective regarding the impact that the internal participatory evaluation process had on the organization. It also provided an opportunity for the respondents to provide feedback on the findings of the study thereby adding to their credibility. A time period of approximately six months was judged by the researchers to be sufficient to allow for impact of the evaluation, both its findings and its process, to become evident.

Plan of Analysis

Coding of data. Procedures for coding these data were based on those described by Miles and Huberman (1984, 1994) and a list of "start codes" grounded in the conceptual framework specified above was applied. The coding process was as follows: 1) the transcripts and archival data were read and divided into meaning units (i.e., part sentences, sentences, multiple sentences, or paragraphs that address a single theme or issue); 2) the data were reviewed a second time as they were entered into the database; and 3) each meaning unit was subsequently read for a third time as the codes were applied. This iterative process allowed the original list of start codes to be refined and new codes to be added.

Inter-coder reliability. Three dimensions of agreement between the researcher and an independent analyst were analyzed: 1) agreement about first order codes; 2) agreement about second order codes; and 3) agreement about causal inferences. Agreement was defined as both the researcher and the independent analyst selecting the same code. The first author and the independent analyst were generally consistent in identifying first order codes and causal inferences. A drop in consistency in agreement about second order codes was noted and may be partially due to the greater variability in the number of codes possible for selection.

Computerization of Analyses. Data from all sources were subsequently sorted and categorized using a database management system called "Visual FoxPro 5.0 for Windows." A template specifically designed for this study was developed and provides the necessary tools to manage data, whether organizing tables of information and running queries, creating an integrated relational database management system, or programming a fully developed data management application for end users.

FINDINGS

Prior to a presentation of the study's findings, a general description of the case organization will assist the reader put the findings in context.

Subsequent to the launch of the evaluation intervention, CNT members with specific program responsibility were implicitly encouraged to work independently to solve problems that affected the programs directly under the individual's control. Senior management's view was that by promoting this kind of individualism and ownership an increased sense of responsibility would be fostered. This in turn, it was believed, would lead to increased productivity

Not surprisingly, when it came time to make decisions on program initiatives or organizational policies, members often acted alone or in concert with only the senior-level staff. CNT members were rarely called upon to be apart of the collective decision-making processes involving program areas or issues outside their jurisdiction. Boundaries were clearly defined around the various programs, and projects offered by the organization and members became quite comfortable in managing their stated portfolios. In addition to affecting the organization's internal operating procedures, this style of conducting business extended to CNT's external relationships. Dealings with partner organizations within the system were relegated to somewhat formal settings (e.g., semi-annual meetings) that dealt with policy issues aimed at maintaining the program's status within the system. These interactions provided little opportunity for program leaders to exchange ideas or beliefs central to the design or delivery of the program and, consequently, little change in the program had been observed since its inception 20 years ago. Furthermore, organizations within the system established rigid jurisdictional control over specific program areas and became quite defensive of their "slice of the program pie."

Given this environment and the limited time members of either CNT or partner organizations engaged in meaningful discussions, the organization was involved in relatively low level or single-loop learning. Such limits on organizational sense making were reflected in the nature of the changes that had occurred to the program during the previous 15 years, the degree of collective thinking and decision making taking place, and the defensive mechanisms that had developed to protect the organization.

The findings associated with the three dimensions – shared knowledge representation, levels of learning, memory – are presented briefly below. An elaborate treatment of the effects on each of these variables is beyond the scope of this paper. Table 1 summarizes how the evaluation process unfolded during the study, as well as the general purpose of each time period (TP). Each section therefore begins with a graphical representation of the extent to which each variable changed over the course of the evaluation project. The trends are presented as a line graph beginning at the baseline (TP 1) or before the project was initiated up to the project's report being released (TP 4).

Variable	Scale	TP 1	TP 2	TP 3	TP 4
Shared Knowledge Representation	high mod-high moderate mod-low low	ml	ml	mh	h

Figure 3. Shared Knowledge Representation

Prior to the start of the project, members from partner organizations were distrustful of CNT and this limited individuals from sharing their views about important program issues. However, once the project was initiated, the collective understanding of the issues improved as members became implicated in the day-to-day operation of the project. As one member remarked, "There was a very clear mandate given to committee members to raise the issue of program revision with not only their constituents but with any other constituents that involve program participants." While the expressed purpose of these discussions was to inform stakeholders about the evaluation project and their role in it, the evidence seemed to suggest that these sessions assisted in confirming viewpoints about program issues that have been batted about for years. By the end of the second time period, although there were still some members harboring feelings that important, fundamental issues needed to "get out on-the-table", a climate for sharing and learning from one another was being established.

A notable improvement was reported by respondents in this regard as the evaluation data began to emerge and committee members began to take an active role in data analysis. A significant consolidation and convergence of views around such issues as: participants' needs and conceptual design resulted from an increased dialogue among members during this intense work phase. As one member representing the national organizations reported:

> I think I have a greater understanding of the issues from actually working with [the researcher] and others in the group over the last eleven months. I'm recording discussion and I'm doing the national organization's report. (TP 3, steering committee member, Megan)

As the project's report was being prepared for release, increased clarity and like-mindedness among committee members was observed. "We have been able to bring the national organizations' position to a point that there are four or five key themes that are starting to emerge" (observation field notes, April 30, 1996).

Two factors appeared to be predominantly responsible for the enhanced states of shared knowledge acquired by organizational members – the participatory evaluation process and the impact of the researcher. First, the participatory process stimulated enhanced commitment to the evaluation exercise and this led to members taking responsibility for various aspects of the evaluative process such as facilitating stakeholder forums.

Information within square brackets in all quotations represents 1) substitution for a participant's name to protect confidentiality, 2) substitution for pronoun not traceable in quoted segment, or 3) implied statement by participant based on information immediately preceding in the interview or participant observation. The date and source (time period, role) appear in parenthesis. Fictitious names for participants are used.

Direct involvement in what can be described as 'learning forums' increased committee members' understanding of both the process, and more importantly, the underlying program and associated organizational issues. A member of the steering committee revealed his perception of the committee's role:

> I think the primary role of the [steering committee] is to make sure that all the partners are really involved in [the project]: they're informed, they get a chance to provide input, they get a chance to provide feedback, to react to what we collect, and then discuss and analyze it in terms of impact on their program and system. (TP 2, steering committee member, Henri)

A more open attitude resulted and this increased the project leaders' sensitivity to the importance of providing key stakeholder groups with opportunities to critique the work of the committee. One member commented on the importance and benefit of providing these forums for sustained interactivity:

> I think [the meeting] was a really important one because there were a lot of people at the table, many of whom weren't really all that up to speed with what we were hoping to accomplish with the program evaluation. A lot of ideas were put on the table and there was a lot of challenge to the people that had designed the initial plan...that made us really question some of the assumptions that they were making. (TP 2, steering committee member, Megan)

This work not only improved their understanding of the issues but gave them confidence in their views. It is also important to note that these individual constructions and mental models would not have been successfully shared without the number of forums for sustained interactivity that kept the issues "top-of-mind" for members.

On the other hand, there were reports that significant program and organizational issues were still "lurking in the background somewhere" and not being dealt with. As one member commented:

> ...the dialogues are happening in the corridors, in the offices, in the regions...independently though. I believe independently. (TP 2, steering committee member, Charles)

Fortunately, as the project reached its latter stages, very few issues were left unearthed. Once again, the ongoing intensive nature of the group's interventions was highlighted as being particularly important in building near unanimous consensus on a large number of diverse program and organizational issues. The actual work by members to create the data collection tools, implement the various data collection steps, analyze the data, and write the report all contributed greatly to the eventual development and acceptance of shared mental models that resulted. Interestingly, one respondent made implicit mention of this phenomena by comparing and contrasting his personal relationship with another member of the committee over the course of the project:

> At one time [committee member] and myself were really arguing on every single issue... fighting all the time. But now, because of our work together, we're together... trying to figure out a way to approach this or that and to make sure that the ideas we share will carry. Now I feel that we're pretty good accomplices and thinking on behalf of the program not just ourselves. (TP 4, steering committee member, Wes)

The researcher made important contributions throughout the project to the creation of a climate conducive to the unearthing of personal beliefs among members and generally holding together the project team as it struggled through some difficult and stormy phases. Not surprisingly, the

researcher's group facilitation skills were mentioned by several respondents as having an important effect on the climate established for members to engage in sessions where personal beliefs and existing mental models would surfaced and then be tested. For example, respondents made mention of how the researcher first "slowed down the process to include everybody in building group consensus." One member commented that the researcher's approach was intentional in the hopes that information and individual perceptions would be shared and group interaction would be fostered:

> I'm not sure what type of leadership [the researcher] would have...participatory certainly. He's very, very careful about getting people informed, involved; it's a very big concern of his to make sure that the partners get the required information, are kept informed of what is going on, and given a chance to think and react to the information. (TP 2, steering committee member, Henri)

Once comfortable, members were then able to share their personal beliefs and conceptions that up until the evaluation project were not discussible, and more importantly, not tested. One member elaborated on a specific intervention technique he found particularly effective:

> ...[the researcher] challenges people to be open and involved. Just the way he set up the agenda last time, the very first item was "let's go around the table and let's talk about how everyone feels about the whole process." I found that really useful for me because it allowed me to express my feelings of being kind of overwhelmed by the whole thing, ... it allowed everybody to do that, to really talk about what's important and to challenge others. I mean, he really encourages that to happen so people are not allowed to be passive. (TP 3, steering committee member, Brad)

The researcher's academic background, research skills, and program expertise were also identified by respondents as being directly linked to process use at the individual level:

> It's been a learning experience for everybody that's for sure. Obviously, the way [the researcher] has been able to lead this project is directly related to the success of the study. If [the researcher] didn't have the academic background in program evaluation I think we would have a much harder time. For me at least, it's been a really valuable learning experience to understand some of these differences in terms of research, the use of data and evaluations. (TP 3, steering committee member, Steve)

Group learning was facilitated by the researcher's capacity to helped members clarify the relationships in the data, see links with other members' views, and connect past events with current thinking. In addition, his 15 years of experience in the program was felt to be especially useful in sorting and filtering the myriad of information generated by the project, as well as accessing 'micro-political' information that was necessary for a deep understanding of the issues. Finally, for a few members, the researcher's technical training as an evaluator contributed to 1) a general sense of confidence that they were on the right track and 2) their personal development regarding knowledge and skills associated with program evaluation.

Variable	Scale	TP 1	TP 2	TP 3	TP 4
Memory	high mod-high moderate mod-low low	l	ml	m	m

Figure 4. Organizational Memory

The ability of the organization to collect, organize, store, and utilize new conceptual frameworks or mental models for decision-making showed improvement as the evaluation project evolved. This dimension was rated as " moderate" at the end of the project as only a limited amount of examples were observed.

Two concrete actions were undertaken by the organization and its members to assist with storing and distributing information and/or shared mental models. The first was the creation of a simple information storage and retrieval system – a set of binders that were temporally organized and contained all project information, including all new ideas, thoughts, and issues under consideration. The binders were continually updated and distributed to both committee members and key stakeholders groups within the system. Previously, information of this nature was never recorded in a manner which could be easily referenced or shared; it was typically held by individual organizational members responsible for a specific program, or embedded in the individual memories of senior management staff. This was one of the few times, sensitive program and organizational issues were exposed for public scrutiny and discussion. One member describes its effects:

> The project leader has created a binder of information that he's made sure every partner gets and he gives them updates on a regular basis. I think that's clearly what the partners need, because it creates a sense of trust, it creates a sense of understanding...because the issues are tracked. (TP 2, steering committee member, Steve)

The second initiative involved the purchase and extensive use of an internet-based electronic mail system. This was viewed as an important 'system' modifier that assisted members to communicate their thoughts, feelings, and individual mental constructions to colleagues as they were being formed across the country. Keeping people talking, sharing ideas, challenging each other outside of formal meetings, was critical to keeping individual mental models explicit in the hopes that shared models would eventually result. Particularly noteworthy conversations were regularly downloaded and distributed (hard copy) to members prior to formal committee meetings to highlight important contributions to a specific issue or conception. Consequently, the email system, in conjunction with the binders, emerged as a sort of repository of the committee's views – past and present.

Variable	Scale	TP 1	TP 2	TP 3	TP 4
Levels of Learning	high mod-high moderate mod-low low				

Figure 5. Levels of Learning

Evidence that organizational double-loop learning occurred ranged from discussions which probed the underlying personal assumptions about the purpose of the program to the traditional roles and decision-making processes used by the organization.

The range of program issues debated by various stakeholder groups provides a gage of the extent of organizational learning encountered. Perhaps the most significant individual learning event resulted from members becoming immersed in an ongoing discussion aimed at uncovering the program's validity assumptions, that is, beliefs about how the program is supposed to work. At a committee meeting in January 1996 and an organization meeting in February 1996, the underlying beliefs as to how the program, and its various steps, was supposed to cause improvements to participants' behaviors was freely discussed and challenged. "There isn't anything articulated anywhere in terms of how the program is to operate. While we have three components with which everyone is familiar, there has never been anything explicitly written down. One of the real treasures of the evaluation will be to have the committee state a program theory in terms of cause-effect relationships and this should provide some very useful guidelines to program designers in the future as they go about reconstructing this thing" (observation field notes, February 22, 1996).

In terms of learning at the organizational level, the evaluation exercise was clearly having impact on the organization's standard operating procedures used to respond to challenges from partner organizations. As one member commented:

> [The project] is the first true example of full involvement [by the partners] in decision making. Historically, decisions about [the program] have pretty much been driven by [the organization]. Now, people expect to be involved. This is something that we had to learn ... we are not the only people being impacted by these decisions. Historically, we were pretty directive when dealing with partner concerns and we have found out that no matter how forceful you want to be, if people don't feel that your decision makes sense or that the decision is not theirs... you can be as forceful as you want but it's not going to work. (TP 3, steering committee member, Henri)

By the end of two and half years of ongoing discussion, debate, and consensus-building, there did seem to be evidence emerging that individual mental models were becoming incorporated into a single or shared set of mental models. This new organizational state was illustrated through numerous observations and comments made by both committee members and important stakeholders not directly involved with the evaluation exercise. For example, committee members from national organizations were faithful to the view that their organizations should be recognized as being the key partner in the system, given their legislated connection to program participants. "The role [CNT] should be playing in the system is that of providing resources and making interventions like [the evaluation project] to assist all the partners facilitate their program. It should not be a top down system where [CNT] drives the program from their lofty command center in Ottawa. In fact the preliminary report really should be

[CNT's] strategic plan for future change" (observation field notes, May 30, 1996). Realizing the political fallout of making such a significant shift, one member cautions:

> There is going to be a gut reaction at [CNT's] board level. [The shift] dilutes a little bit of the power from [CNT]. So who knows what the political response will be to that. I mean, because that's where policy is formed, right? At the board table. (TP 4, steering committee member, Tom)

For other members of the organization, the experience of working and interacting with many partner organizations throughout the evaluation project resulted in similar views being formed. In their words:

> I think the organization is not so centered on itself, it recognizes the importance of key players outside the organization and how important it is to get them to contribute to the changes being made so that they will then buy in. So [the organization] has a greater understanding of it's role as a service organization. In the past it was "we are here to implement changes and here are the changes so you do it..." So that's a fundamental shift. It's not 100% that way, I just see the organization going in that direction. I think this project really helped to give it a big push. (TP 4, steering committee member, Brenda)

It is worthwhile to note how these perceptions transcended the committee to other key individuals within CNT as well as the system. The organization's long-time president confirmed that a change in the traditional way of doing business was likely. He too seemed to be caught up in the process used to conduct the evaluation. When asked if "the partners would expect more involvement in the future," he replied:

> Yes, I think the trend has been set. There is no question that in the early years [CNT] was not only the engine for driving these projects and doing the actual work, [CNT] did a great deal of decision making in a fairly authoritarian fashion--it did get things done because it was authoritarian. Now we have an expectation by the partners, as a result of [the project], that a more democratic process will be used in the future. (TP 4, president of organization)

The president also provided some intriguing personal reflections on other important effects he noticed. In his words:

> ...[the project] has unearthed some leadership which was pretty well disguising itself as being dormant. Opportunities have been provided for individuals with capabilities to demonstrate those capabilities, and that's what this very time consuming, involvement process has allowed to happen. (TP 4, president of organization)

As the above quotes imply, the support provided by CNT's president was very important to fostering the high levels of learning that appeared to have resulted as a consequent of this project. The president, throughout the study, stimulated organization members to seriously question not only the purpose and role of the program, but the organization itself. Interview data made mention of the president's personal views regarding the need for CNT to change "its way of doing business." He took it upon himself to encourage others in the organization to recognize and deal with the strategic future of the organization including how CNT would be able to meet the expectations of the partner organizations (e.g., what skills would staff need to possess and/or acquire). At one point leading up to the project's final report, the president actually chastised some members of the steering committee for not having the confidence of recommending fundamental program and/or system changes if they felt them to be in order.

It is interesting to note how the president came to hold the view that CNT had to undergo a significant change to its operating style and/or its culture. Simply, he acquired his new insight from sharing information with members at all levels within organization. The president fostered this organizational climate through his active interest in the issues being discussed and by publicly acknowledging the intellectual abilities of the members and encouraging their work.

Two other variables are worth noting. First, the decision of the federal government to reduce funding to CNT and the partner organizations triggered those partners who were responsible for program implementation to re-examine their roles and consider new strategic alliances to ensure the survival of existing programs. This period of reflection and examination led to a series of first-ever discussions about the role CNT held within the system, especially as it related to the power it possessed *vis-à-vis* the national organizations. As one member from a national organization's reported, "the baseball bat held by the organization all these years is going or is gone." The notable second variable, which is also tied to the funding issue, relates to the establishment of a mentorship system among the national organizations to assist one another cope with the inevitable program and system changes set to come. With the federal government and CNT losing it's positional power within the system combined with new strategic alliances being formed by the partner organizations, the stage would seem to be set for significant organizational change. At the very least, partner organizations were now demanding and receiving an opportunity to influence both program and organizational decisions. Clearly, a collaborative decision-making process was emerging and taking hold; this process was effectively replacing the traditional practice whereby CNT would produce policies that the national organizations would be expected to implement with little or no involvement in their formulation.

Discussion

Cousins and Earl (1992) were among the first to advance the notion that participatory forms of evaluations should be re-conceptualized due to their effects not only on the program under study but on the organization within which the program is situated. The authors proposed that due to the partnership which is developed (between the trained evaluation personnel and practice-based decision makers) and nature of the work involved in the conduct of the evaluation, participatory evaluation can stimulate the kinds of social interaction and dialogue necessary for improved organizational learning.

While several other authors (e.g., Lafleur, 1995; Owen & Lambert, 1995; Preskill, 1994) support this direction in the literature, clarity as to what 'organizational learning' means, which individual, and/or group processes stimulates its development and, more importantly, their differential effects on learning has received limited attention. For example, what do researchers' mean when they state that organizational learning has been enhanced or reduced? The construct is a dense one and the elements associated with organizational learning are somewhat nebulous. As was observed by Huberman (1995), organizational learning "is a slippery measure, and I am one of several who is wary of it" (p.103). Consequently, researchers have had difficulty both defining and associating organizational learning outcomes with specific elements of the participatory evaluation process.

The present study has taken a step, albeit tentative, towards addressing this problem by describing how one organization increased its capacity to take effective action – to learn. It conceptualized organizational learning by delineating or breaking apart the construct into four dimensions and four processes. The study also sheds some light on how a participatory evaluation intervention in a national, not-for-profit training organization acted to facilitate the *transfer* of individual mental models and beliefs to an organization. If organizations ultimately learn via their individual members, then it is appropriate that we first frame our discussion of the study's results in terms of how the participatory process acted to facilitate individual learning. We will then and describe how this learning was transferred and integrated into the organization.

One approach to individual learning that is consistent with the underlying philosophy of participatory evaluation has evolved from David Kolb's work in this area. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle theory advocates that individuals should be required to test out the conclusions that they reach through active experimentation. Action is necessary for it serves to both test the interpretations made and to generate new information that continues the learning process. Individual learning is thought to be dependent on action because: 1) a gap exists between stored knowledge and knowledge required to act effectively; 2) the organizational contexts are constantly changing; and 3) it is necessary for the organization members to codify effective behavior (integrated into existing memory) so that it can be reliably repeated (Argyris, 1993).

The collaborative requirements of this particular evaluation placed specific demands on each member to actively engaged in various steps of the intervention – constructing instruments, analyzing data, presenting reports, continuously debating fundamental assumptions. These actions, particularly the latter two, assisted individuals to alter and/or refine their mental models through a personal process of actively integrating viewpoints from many sources and then testing them in a public domain. This validation step, as highlighted by the findings, helped members to alter existing frames of understanding and move beyond conventional thinking and to challenge current paradigms.

As argued previously, organizational learning is more sophisticated in terms of the process required to effect change than is the case at the individual level. Once new individual mental models are established, it is crucial that they be made explicit if new shared/organizational mental models are to be formed (Kim, 1993). Dixon (1994) refers to individual mental models that are withheld from other members as 'private meaning structures'. These models are withheld for a variety of reasons that extend from respecting the sources of information that was given in confidence to a recognition that certain information carries significant political influence/power. Regardless, organizational learning is dependent on establishing an environment whereby 1) individuals make their mental models available to others, 2) others in the organization are able and motivated to make use of them, and 3) individual learning is retained by the organization for future use.

The efficacy of internal participatory evaluation in facilitating the necessary environment that would support these three inter-related activities is still open to debate and likely to depend significantly on context. However, evidence was provided in the present study to support the conclusion that if conducted in a specific fashion, by the right person, over a long enough period of time, process/organizational effects can be observed. Sensitive, micro-political information can be unearthed and positioned in the public (organizational) domain that will challenge the individual and/or collective view of reality. Key decision makers/stakeholders can be stimulated to reflect intently on what these differences are and the significance they hold. The participatory process has also been shown to generate a high degree of personal motivation to engage in an ongoing debate (in this case approximately two years) with colleagues to resolve differences of opinions and to work towards a set of shared assumptions. And finally, that these shared models can then be stored in the organization's memory for future use.

While it is obvious that one study cannot cast this form of evaluation as a panacea for those wishing to enhance an organization's learning capacity, it does offer hope. The study should also give future researchers some guidance as to the power of longitudinal designs assisting in developing understanding about the use of evaluation findings and processes in the practical milieu.

Implications for Research

The findings of the present study have provided a much more positive assessment of the impact of participatory evaluation on organizational learning. Although the study tracked a number of variables linked to organizational learning capacity, the conceptual framework developed to guide this study was preliminary and should be therefore considered as a catalyst for future research. For example, given the important role that the context of the evaluation plays, would the conditions under which organization

learning appears to occur in a not-for-profit organization differ from conditions in the private sector? What are the factors likely to be associated with higher levels of organizational learning in settings where profit is the goal. We also need to know more about practice. What is it that evaluators do to facilitate the organizational constructs investigated in the present literature? While the present study provides a starting point, consideration could be given to debriefing experienced evaluators who have an interest in the organizational consequences of participatory evaluation.

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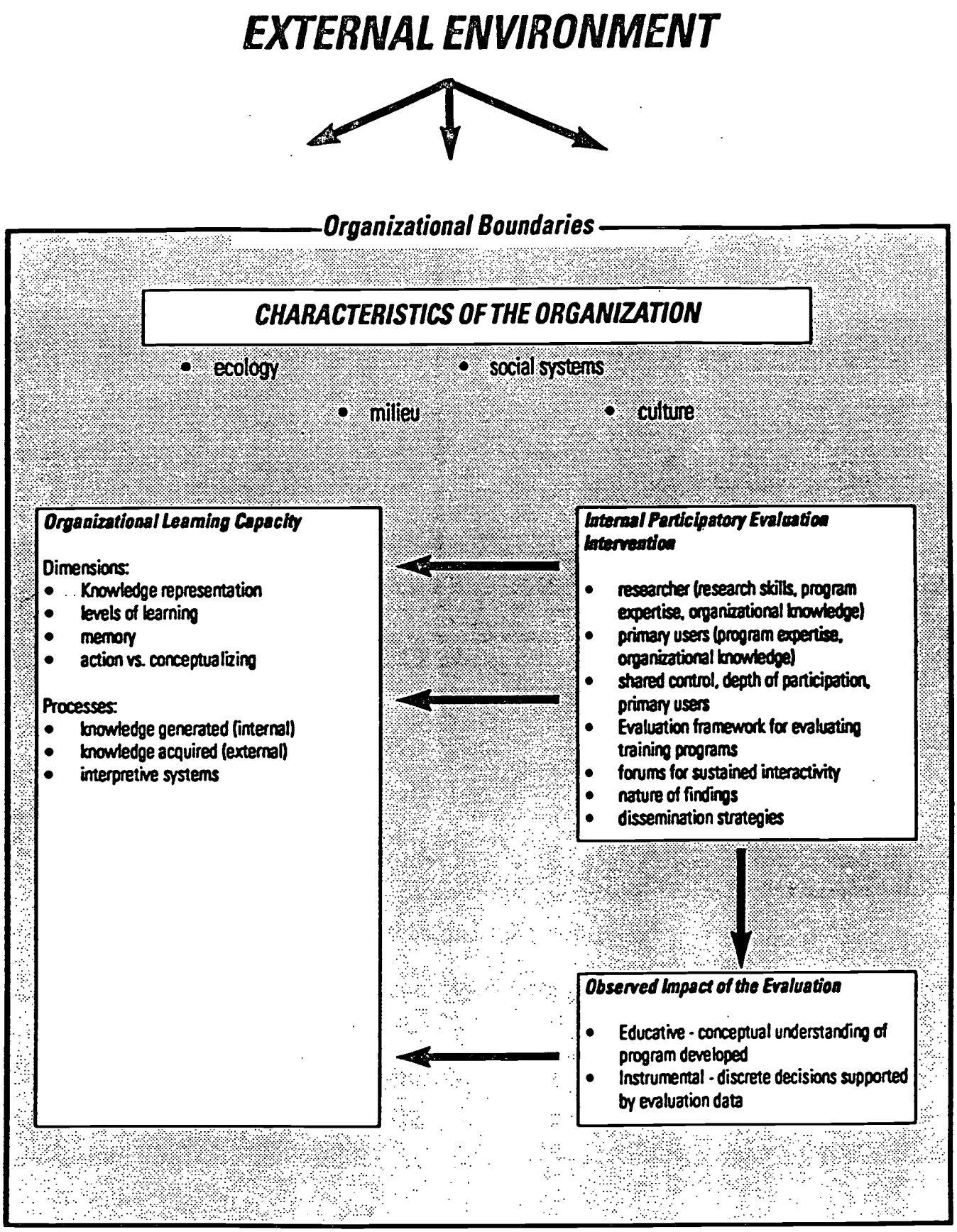

Figure 1. Conceptual framework: Internal participatory evaluation as an organizational intervention.

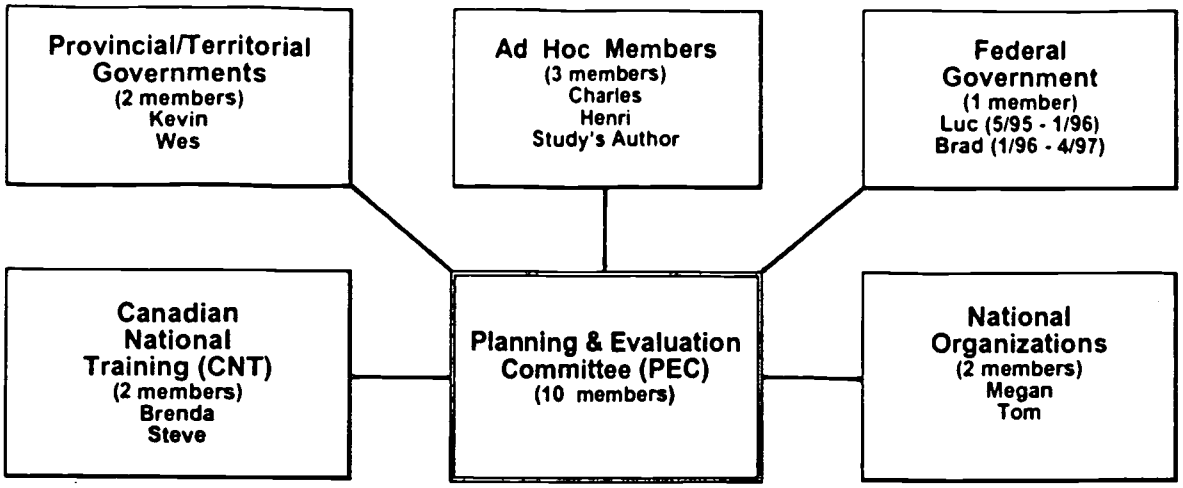

Figure 2. Make-up of the evaluation project's steering committee

TABLE 1

Summary of Evaluation Study: Time Periods & Purpose

Time Period	Dates	Description
TP 1	< May 10, 1995	baseline description
TP 2	May 1995 to October 1995	finalize design; initiation of data collection
TP 3	October 1995 to April 1996	completion of data collection; initiation of data analysis
TP 4	April 1996 to October 1996	completion of data analysis; report preparation
TP 5	October 1996 to April 1997	impact of evaluation findings; process use

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