NCNCANADA

Shared Spaces Learning Series

KNOWLEDGE IN ACTION 3:
PROVING AND IMPROVING – EVALUATION IN SHARED SPACES

Roman Katsnelson
Erin McFarlane

NCN Canada: A Program of Tides Canada

Tides Canada

NCN Canada and the Shared Spaces Learning Series

Mission-driven shared spaces have long operated across Canada in service of a variety of social and hybrid missions. More recently, the phenomenon of shared spaces has been experiencing a surge in growth and strategic interest across the public, private and non-profit sectors. In 2016 Tides Canada, with support from the Non-profit Centers Network (NCN), initiated a new program, **NCN Canada**. The aim of NCN Canada is to address the unique needs of Canadian organizations involved in non-profit shared space projects.

This paper is a part of NCN Canada's *Shared Spaces Learning Series* initiative, designed to contribute to the emerging national conversation about the roles, capacities, and limitations of shared spaces, broadly understood in various contexts as Community Hubs, Social Purpose Real Estate, and Non-profit Centres. The Learning Series features "Knowledge in Action" research briefs, which gather and summarize relevant data and information, and "Stories from the Centres" case studies, highlighting emerging practices and perspectives in Canadian shared spaces.

HOW CAN THIS GUIDE BE USED?

Operators of non-profit centres will find this guide helpful as an introduction to evaluation practice in the context of Canadian shared spaces. The different purposes achieved by evaluation and the variety of tools and frameworks currently used in the field are highlighted within.

Each organization's context is unique and no general guide can replace the utility of specific research and consultation. The aim of this paper is to introduce information from a broad and emerging field, to help facilitate useful conversations, and to help operators clarify the questions relevant to their specific contexts.

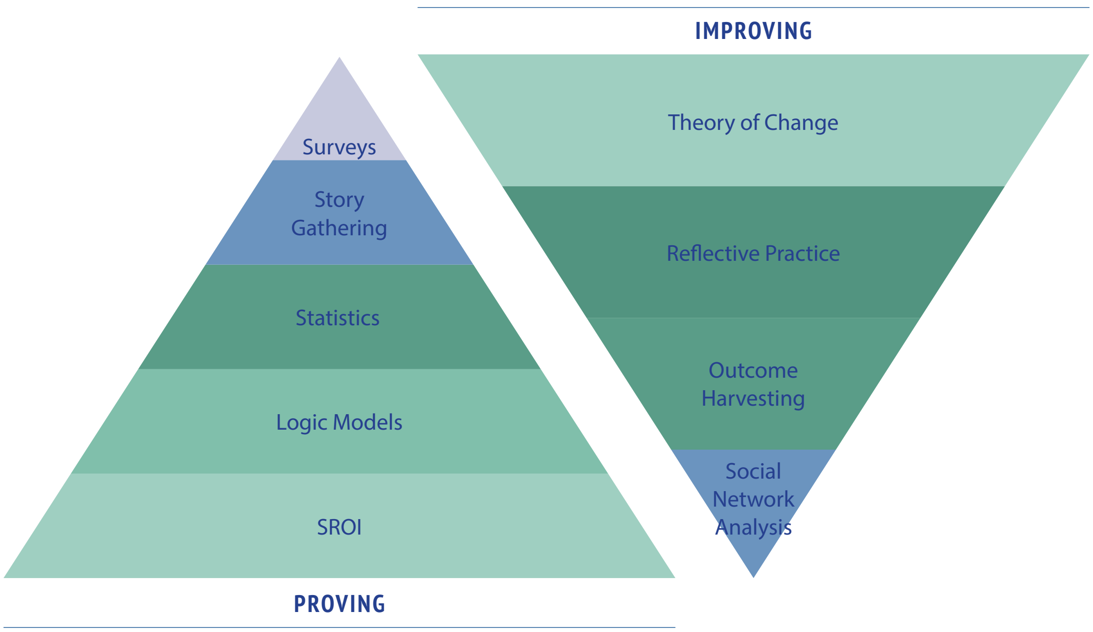
The information in this paper should not be construed as legal counsel.

WHAT IS INSIDE?

This paper is organized in three sections: *Proving: Evaluation for External Stakeholders*, *Improving: Evaluation for Internal Stakeholders*, and *Canadian Resources*. The first section focuses on evaluation as impact measurement and its role in communicating the validity of shared space models. The second section describes evaluation as integrated learning and its role in clarifying and developing those models. The final section introduces the curious reader to further engagement with the world of evaluation with a brief introduction to emerging practices and resources in the Canadian context.

Introduction

As social enterprises, shared spaces operate in a context of complexity, exhibiting great variation in legal structures[1], business models[2], and operational mandates. Across this wide diversity, however, common themes exist. Shared spaces are mission driven to support their members, strengthen their organizational and collaborative capacity, and support system change in the sectors in which they operate. In other words, in accordance with your particular vision and mission, your centre seeks to make a difference – and that work engenders some necessary questions. How do you know what difference is actually being accomplished? How well do you understand any links between your model, your work, and the impacts they create? How accurate are your assumptions about what your members need from you? How do you use what you know to effectively communicate with others?



These and other reality-testing questions form the basis of evaluation practice, a vast field of inquiry that continues to evolve and develop a multitude of techniques, tools, and frameworks. Its breadth can be mystifying, making evaluation hard to approach. In addition, organizations' first evaluative activities are often in response to external pressures (such as funder requirements), making evaluation feel somewhat invasive and even threatening. Finally, evaluation – especially ongoing, embedded evaluation that really yields internal benefit – requires significant resourcing, in the form of both time and money. As a result of these factors, evaluation often remains something we value but don't do. In this paper, our goal is to present some views on evaluation from the shared space field and to describe several tools and frameworks that you can, in different contexts, make use of.

[1] See NCN Canada's *Knowledge In Action Volume 1: Corporate Structures and Regulatory Context*

[2] See NCN Canada's Knowledge in *Action Volume 2: From Start-up to Sustainability – Emerging Business Models*

We borrow from the field of Utilization-Focused Evaluation to consider different possible uses and users of evaluation. Utilization-Focused Evaluation *"does not advocate for any particular evaluation content, model, method, theory or even use. It is a process for helping primary intended users select the most appropriate content, model, methods, theory, and uses for their particular situation."*[3] In this paper, for the sake of readability, we have mapped ideas and approaches on the spectrum from "proving" to "improving." We categorized them into these groups based on their origin and initial usefulness to external and internal stakeholders, respectively. However, most tools will have usefulness in both realms.

Where applicable, we also highlight the perspectives unique to your work in shared spaces – for example, questions about use of land, use of asset capital, and organizational community development. We wrap up with highlighting some current (in 2017) Canadian resources, in the hopes that after reading this paper you will want to engage in one or more of the evaluative approaches highlighted.

[3] "Utilization-Focused Evaluation," 4th Ed. M.Q. Patton. Sage, 2008

Proving – Evaluation for Accountability

The language of "proving" is rooted in the experience of non-profit work generally, and of shared spaces specifically. At the outset of initiatives – whether recruiting partners, soliciting funding, or advocating for system changes – our work often takes the shape of persuading others of the merit of our models and the positivity of our impact. Subsequently, in parallel with running centres and programs, we face the challenges of external accountability – reporting on impacts accomplished and measured, communicating the value of the work. In both of these forms – persuasion and external accountability – the goal of evaluation activities is to measure impact and enable better communication. Following are some approaches, ranging from the informal to highly structured, that shared spaces in Canada have been using.

SURVEYS

The survey is perhaps the most recognizable of all evaluation tools. Useable in either paper or electronic formats, surveys are simple to implement and are a low-cost way to maximize the number of respondents and standardize responses. Surveys can be easily implemented in a one-time approach (for example, at the completion of a training session or a collaborative workgroup), or in an ongoing fashion (for example, a semi-annual survey of all members). Finally, depending on question design, surveys can be used to begin measuring a variety of impacts, from member satisfaction to community impact.

Survey results can also be used for a comparative analysis, helping to understand how impact changes over time. You can experiment with a survey where some quantifiable questions (yes/no or numeric scales) will remain the same over a multi-year period. This will help the organization establish a baseline and then track changes along its strategic priorities and programmatic streams.

Survey design is a critical success factor for this approach. Best practices include a combination of quantifiable questions and open-ended ones to enable better interpretation of the results.

STORY GATHERING

To capture complexity in ways quantitative data just can't, many organizations use the simple but powerful narrative technique of storytelling. These can take the form of success stories or challenge stories, or stories of change over time. The great strength of short narratives is their ability to capture the variety of experiences your members have, and to give voice to difference.

Some organizations describe an explicit "story gatherer" role, which can be filled by a staff person, a volunteer, a summer intern or practicum student, or by a collaborative committee of member representatives. An annual story-gathering project, for example, will not only provide you with useful information, but also engage members in a kind of ritualized reflective process about what it means to be a member of your centre.

STATISTICS

Some evaluative data exists, whether or not you use it for evaluation, in the form of statistics. Occupancy rates, for example, are something that any building manager should track in the interest of sustainability – but different interpretations of these can tell you something new in the context of shared space models. *The Common Roof* in Barrie, Ontario has been tracking the renewal rate on leases, using these as an indicator of its tenants' faith in the collaborative model. Other statistical information can provide similar insights when tracked over time.

LOGIC MODELS

Logic models represent a more rigorous and explicit approach to program or impact evaluation. Long required by some funders, logic models are planning and monitoring frameworks that require you to make predictions about how impact will unfold (planning) and to create and implement a data gathering process to check up on the process of that unfolding (monitoring).

A logic model works by delineating inputs, outputs, and outcomes, and the relationship between them. *Inputs* include required resources (e.g. staff time, space rental) and planned activities (e.g. six meetings over the course of a year). *Outputs* refer to the immediately measurable, short-term results of the activities, are usually numeric, and often include targets (e.g. 40 people attend at least five of six meetings; 80% of participants report making new connections). *Outcomes* are the desired changes and goals of the initiative, sometimes further divided into mid-term and long-term. These are usually not immediately measurable (e.g. Tenant members increase collaborative capacity; Members have increased networks of support; Community goals are better met). In order to monitor progress across the outcome domains, logic models assign a set of indicators to each statement.

Logic models can be highly effective in contexts where prediction is likely to be at least somewhat accurate – for example, if you are implementing a best practice or promising practice approach, or scaling a previously designed program. In such cases, implementing a logic model will enable you, at any given point, to gain an understanding of progress towards your anticipated outcomes, and to communicate that progress to interested stakeholders in the form of progress reports.

SOCIAL RETURN ON INVESTMENT (SROI)

Measuring impact can be even more challenging for those components of your mission work that are not delivered programmatically. For example, how do you measure the value of colocation itself (apart from collaborative or community efforts), or of providing subsidized space to individuals and organizations that otherwise could not access it – aspects of work common to many shared spaces and social purpose real estate (SPRE) operators?

One approach to solving this challenge is Social Return on Investment, or SROI, analysis. SROI represents a research-based attempt to quantify the value of certain preventative impacts and equate them with financial gains of "social value." Prevention is key in this model – the financial gains are actually the equivalent of avoided costs that would have accrued had your impact not prevented some problematic outcome. The analysis proceeds by adding up the input costs on one side and the social value returns on the other, producing a ratio as its final result. The ratio can then be simply communicated to say, "Each dollar invested in our work produces X dollars in social value."

In a typical SROI analysis, the input side of the equation consists only of operating costs. However, in its 2015 SROI project, Vancouver's *Central City Foundation* has created an important adaptation of the method by including the capital asset value of its buildings as an input. This adaptation brings SROI practice more in line with the world of SPRE and non-profit centres,[4] and has added to the Central City Foundation's capacity to showcase its model to potential partners, supporters and replicators[5].

Finally, we should note that since SROI formulates its results as ratios, comparison across different initiatives can become tempting. However, such practice is rarely helpful because the analytical process is highly contextual and highly selective – not all impacts can be adequately represented as SROI proxy indicators, and those that can still represent approximations. SROI is an important piece in the evaluation puzzle, but does not represent the full scope of an organization's impact.

[4] https://www.centralcityfoundation.ca/news-and-reports/exploring-sroi-at-central-city-foundation/

[5] See also NCN Canada's *Centre Profile 3 – Central City Foundation* for a detailed account of their SROI project.

Improving – Evaluation for Learning

In addition to the tasks of measuring and communicating, evaluation represents a powerful tool for organizational learning. A learning team, or learning organization or collaborative, is a space where participants engage in the construction of new knowledge and new meaning via the processes of collective reflection and inquiry. For shared spaces committed to supporting new models of collaboration, the engagement of members in facilitated collective learning can drive the mission forward. The evaluation approach that best supports this is known as *Developmental Evaluation*. In contrast with other approaches, which are periodic instances of research and interpretation, developmental evaluation is integrated into the work in an ongoing way. The techniques and frameworks highlighted in this section comprise some of the ways to "do" developmental evaluation, building internal capacity while yielding information useful for both external and internal accountability – to each other, to our members and participants, and to our organizations.

THEORY OF CHANGE

A Theory of Change is a descriptive tool, comprised of a "comprehensive description and illustration of how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context."[6] It weaves together threads of your vision, mission, and guiding values, your assumptions, plans, and anticipations of impact. A Theory of Change is agnostic in its shape – it can take the form of a descriptive one-page document, a graphic representation, or a chart. Whatever the shape, it can provide a bridge between your strategic plan and ongoing implementation and management, acting as a map against which any other evaluative findings can be mapped. By making your values explicit, a Theory of Change helps to understand whether the impact you are achieving (both anticipated and unexpected) is aligned with your mission; and by making your assumptions explicit, it helps to test them against reality and continue to refine them in an ongoing way.

Because a Theory of Change is essentially a planning document, it is most impactful when used alongside one or more other evaluation techniques or approaches.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Reflective practice is perhaps the most open-ended of these approaches, allowing you to learn directly from the experiences and reflections of participating members. There are many ways to engage in reflective practice; the approach described below is one.

Reflective practice begins individually, with the process of keeping an outcomes diary. Participants are asked to set aside some time on a regular basis to document changes they are noticing or participating in, and to reflect on the meaning of these changes by answering a short series of guiding questions (e.g. Why is this important? What role did you play? What was surprising? etc.).

Following this, collective reflection takes place in the context of facilitated small group discussions, which meet periodically to share individual reflections, and build and document collective learning. Small groups complete by surfacing a series of either action commitments or recommendations.

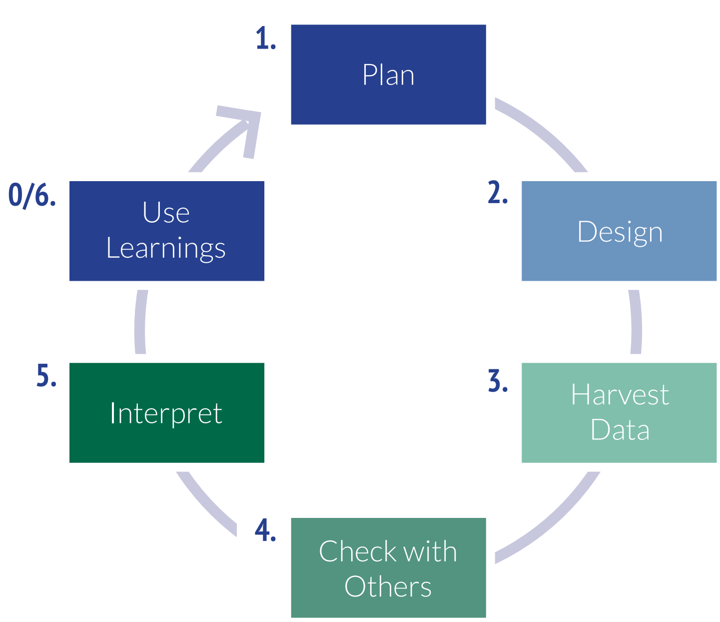
---

[6] http://www.theoryofchange.org/what-is-theory-of-change/

This approach is based in the principles of Participatory Action Research, and is particularly useful in contexts of rapid change, experimental project design, or new initiatives/new members. Bringing together representatives from member organizations in a shared space context can yield not only unique new knowledge, but also act as a powerful engagement tool. It is, however, a time-intensive proposition and may not be a fit in every context. In addition, it's crucial to build in ways to act on the results of the Reflective Practice process – whether integrating the specific learnings that surface, or moving commitments and recommendations through a formal and transparent decision-making and change process. Without this, participants may feel that their time and effort have been wasted, resulting in barriers to future engagement.

OUTCOME HARVESTING

Outcome Harvesting is an evaluation framework originally developed for the International Development context. It is a highly flexible and robust approach, which yields both internal learning and externally useable data. Its flexibility comes from its lack of reliance on predictions: *"Outcome Harvesting does not measure progress towards predetermined outcomes or objectives, but rather collects evidence of what has been achieved, and works backward to determine whether and how the project or intervention contributed to the change."*[7]



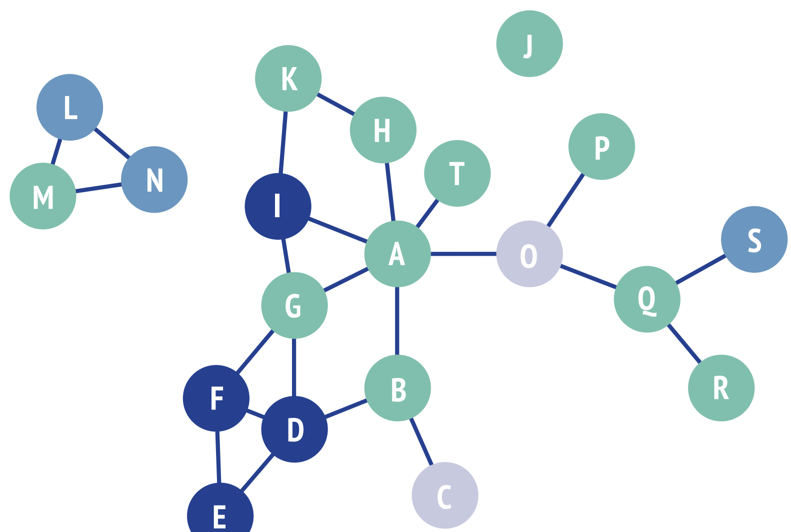
As a result of its shift in focus from prediction to observation, Outcome Harvesting does not rely only on data generated specifically for an evaluation purpose, but allows you to systematically learn from the various artifacts incidentally created as a byproduct of work: emails, meeting minutes, event attendance and feedback forms, photographs, media articles, social media mentions, etc. The data is collected, organized according to a set of designed questions, and thematized into working hypotheses. These hypotheses are then brought back to stakeholders (internal and external) in some combination of surveys, interviews or focus groups for a process of substantiation. The enriched hypotheses form your set of findings, which are then taken through a facilitated process of interpretation and action planning. The complete process can then be repeated in ongoing iterations.

[7] http://outcomeharvesting.net/outcome-harvesting-brief/

CommunityWise Resource Centre in Calgary, Alberta has performed an Outcome Harvest as a part of a broader Developmental Evaluation of its Collaborative Framework project, which also made use of Theory of Change and Reflective Practice techniques.[8,9] The Outcome Harvest engaged centre staff, Board, volunteers, and tenant members in various roles through the process, resulting in broad internal validity of learning as well as strong engagement.

SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS

Social Network Analysis (SNA) is a learning evaluation tool of particular use to shared space operators with an emphasis on collaboration and community development. SNA is one of many evaluation techniques that are rooted in Systems Thinking concepts. It works by providing visual representations of relationships among actors in a system – whether those actors are individuals or organizations. The actors are represented as "nodes", and relationships as lines between them, forming a sort of map. Lines can be stylized in a variety of ways to easily see different kinds of relationships – formal partnerships, informal connections, personal ties, funding flows, etc. The resulting maps show complex information in an accessible way, often resulting in new insights and pointing the way to adaptive moves to strengthen ties, think through opportunities to engage more isolated actors, etc.



In addition, SNA maps can be used for comparative analysis to demonstrate the impact of engagement programming over time. A single analysis represents a snapshot of a community at a point in time. Subsequent analyses can show changes in size and overall connectedness of the network, as well as variation in roles of particular members.

[8] http://communitywise.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/CommunityWise-Resource-Centre---Outcome-Harvest-2015.pdf

[9] See also NCN Canada's *Centre Profile 4 – CommunityWise Resource Centre* for a detailed description of their evaluation process.

Diving Deeper – Canadian Resources

The field of evaluation is broad and continually growing. The *Canadian Evaluation Society* has chapters in every province and territory and hundreds of professional members. This is likely to be just the tip of the iceberg, too, since many people engage in evaluative activities internally, as part of their broader organizational roles, and would not consider themselves professional evaluators. The breadth of the field together with the significant variability of methods, theories, and approaches means that there is no single way to "do" evaluation, just as there is no single way to "do" shared spaces. Evaluative practice at many organizations grows in iterative stages, with some tools being used just once and left behind, and others entering into an evolving evaluative framework. There is a lot of room for experimentation, and a growing body of resources and communities to support your work. We include brief descriptions of a few of these, to encourage your exploration.

TAMARACK INSTITUTE

The Tamarack Institute is a Canadian think-tank for community change. One of its five focus areas is "Evaluating Community Impact." In support of this focus area, Tamarack maintains an excellent online resource with user-friendly descriptions and case studies highlighting emerging evaluation practices; hosts online and in-person Communities of Practice; and puts on periodic three-day conferences on the topic.

Learn more at **http://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/evaluatingcommunityimpact**

INNOWEAVE

An initiative of the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, Innoweave works to build capacity in Canadian non-profits across a set of 10 modules, one of which is Developmental Evaluation. Non-profits can access self-assessment tools and take part in local or online basic training modules. After completing these steps, organizations become eligible for grants of up to $20,000 (as of 2017) to support their own Developmental Evaluation processes.

Learn more at **http://innoweave.ca/en/modules/developmental-evaluation**

ONTARIO NONPROFIT NETWORK (ONN)

ONN's work intersects most directly with Canadian shared spaces through its "Community Hubs" structure, but it also does innovative work through another key structure, "Evaluation." Through this arm, ONN works to "create a more enabling ecosystem for evaluation in the nonprofit sector," hosting a mailing list and publishing guides and position papers both in written form and as podcasts. Its most recent publication, "Five important discussion questions to make evaluation useful," focuses on broad foundational questions that are critical to consider regardless of what techniques you eventually choose.

Learn more at **http://theonn.ca/our-work/our-structures/evaluation/**

CENTRE FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION (CSI)

The Centre for Social Innovation has published the results of its own evaluation activities in an open-source book entitled *Proof*. Although this resource doesn't describe the evaluation methods or approaches used, it is a strong showcase for the use of evaluation in telling the many stories of shared space. Armed with your new knowledge, you should be able to reverse engineer this report and, hopefully, find applications for your own context.

Learn more at **http://socialinnovation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Proof_How_shared_spaces_are_changing_the_world_.pdf**

WELL LIVING HOUSE

The Well Living House publishes and maintains a great list of Indigenous evaluation frameworks.

Learn more at **http://www.welllivinghouse.com/resources/indigenous-evaluation**

NONPROFIT CENTERS NETWORK

Learn more about NCN's Evaluation Project, a peer learning initiative kicking off in February 2017, and more at **http://www.nonprofitcenters.org**

CENTRAL CITY FOUNDATION SROI RESULTS

https://www.centralcityfoundation.ca/news-and-reports/exploring-sroi-at-central-city-foundation/

COMMUNITYWISE RESOURCE CENTRE OUTCOME HARVEST REPORT

http://communitywise.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/CommunityWise-Resource-Centre---Outcome-Harvest-2015.pdf

NCNCANADA

THE NONPROFIT CENTERS | NETWORK CANADA

NCN Canada: A Program of Tides Canada

Tides Canada