**Quality Qualitative: Photographic Elicitation in WP Practice**

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Why do we evaluate our outreach projects?

* To improve performance
* To check our intervention is working / achieving aims and objectives
* We’re required to (e.g. by OfS)

What data do we generate and what do we do with it?

* Feedback forms
* Pre- and post-survey data
* HEAT data – including postcodes, WP criteria, session details
* Interviews, observations and focus groups

There are two types of data: quantitative and qualitative

Our standard practice is to generate feedback/data/measurables, evaluate, assess the impact of an intervention, and then store and report on our data. We don’t usually tend to go much further after we’ve reported on our data and stored it away. Yet there are repercussions of either under-evaluating programmes or of evaluating them badly. The standard cycle we usually follow is to design a programme, run it, evaluate it and see if it works or not. However, this cycle excludes the students that we work with and it also demonstrates evaluation as confirmation – we test and evaluate what we already know, evaluating to hear what we want to hear and reinforcing our own perceptions. It is us, as the practitioners, who own, control and use the knowledge. This standard evaluation practice just makes the young people we work with the subject of our evaluation, rather than involving them actively.

Examples of activities that conventional evaluation has shown to be effective: tutoring and campus visits (assemblies and lecture-led sessions are also somewhat effective). We know these activities work, evaluation has demonstrated this. But the question to ask is ‘why’. This is ‘the assumption gap’ that we make – we don’t investigate why these interventions actually work.

Example of the ‘Spotlight Day Programme’ at City, University of London

* A project for primary school children from Islington
* Involves 3-6+ campus visits during Year 5 and 2-3 interventions during Year 6
* There’s a large academic-led component to the programme

Quantitative evaluation indicates that this programme works! But …

* It’s very expensive
* How much engagement is too much? How much is actually required?
* Is primary work effective long-term?
* Should the programme be kept stable or expanded? Can we afford to make efficiencies, changes or redesign?

We started to look at qualitative evaluation solutions to better understand how and why the programme works. We wanted to know:

* What do the children remember?
* What do they enjoy?
* Why have they changed?

And we wanted to involve them in the evaluation process.

Photographic elicitation in practice

We got together a group of students who were taking part in the programme, gave them cameras and film, and allowed them to take photos of whatever they wanted during their campus visits, without providing any guidance. We then interviewed the young people and made transcripts of the interviews. In some cases, we also got the young people to create storyboards from their photos.

This generated two sources of data – the photos they created and what they said about them. We then carried out a discourse/thematic analysis and a visual analysis on the transcripts and photographs, in an attempt to find out what is actually going on and why.

The reason photographic elicitation works is because the brain functions best when it’s looking at things; a picture prompts young people to think in real depth about what they remember and what was important to them.

Findings from the visual analysis

A difference was observed between the kind of photos young people took when they were regular visitors to the university and the kind of photos that one-off visitors took. The groups of young people who visit the campus regularly (e.g. spending approximately five full days on campus) situate themselves within the campus in their photographs. They are in the photos! In contrast, non-regular visitors take typical ‘tourist photos’ of the campus, which they don’t feature in.

One-off visitors use the camera as an eye, whereas regular visitors use the camera to document what they are doing, rather than what they are seeing.

Findings from the text analysis

In order to evaluate what the young people told us about their photos, we used NVivo – a piece of computer software used for qualitative data analysis. It allows you to code, or tag, concepts. These codes emerge through close reading of the transcripts. NVivo can identify positive and negative associations and related concepts etc. It allows you to start to get into the mind of an 11-year-old.

NVivo allows you to visualise the data – you can visually see which concepts are strongly/closely associated for the young people and which have a weaker, or no, association. For example, academic staff were talked about, but the young people discussed them completely separately from all other concepts. ‘Students/Ambassadors’ and ‘study/learning’ were positive concepts and ‘barriers’ to study and the ‘university environment/buildings’ were negative concepts.

This text analysis allows us to start bridging the gap between what the students say they did on their visits and what they conclude from this. When the young people talk about the Ambassadors they engaged with, they conclude that they feel welcome at the university and would like to go to university. However, they don’t draw any conclusions from what they learnt about the university itself, or the subject workshops they took part in. Positive feelings of belonging are related to Ambassadors, a continuity of people, events and spaces on their visits and familiarity and high-frequency. However, the text analysis reveals the minimal impact of academic sessions.

Conclusions

This type of qualitative evaluation allows us to be student-led and creative. We can investigate ‘why’ without imposing our own why and we can learn directly from the students how to deliver better programmes.

Photographic elicitation may sound complicated, but we all already collect qualitative data and think about it. Identify expertise in qualitative evaluation methods within your own institutions and experiment with software, research and methods.

We need to know ‘what works’, but once we’ve answered this question we should also try to think about ‘how’ and ‘why’. Qualitative evaluation can take us to this next stage.