The Fishbowl Method in Evaluation
- work in progress -

Preliminary Notes

In January 2005 Wolfgang Beywl posted a question to EVALTALK concerning the application and dissemination of the “Fishbowl Method” in evaluations, especially such with severe conflicts of interests between different stakeholder groups. Asking his question he had in mind a very specific setting to generate data about conflicts, strategies of conflict resolution and cooperation. No one out of the EVALTALK list reported experiences with this tool.

Michael Patton from a very broad perspective commented that the Univation approach is a very specific variation of fishbowl settings in Evaluation:

In my experience and practice, "fishbowl" refers to any approach in which one group is interacting while a larger group watches … For example, in my evaluation workshops I often do consulting demonstrations in which I work with one, two, or three people while a larger group observes but does not participate. That is also a fishbowl -- and a variation on the fishbowl approach. It is commonly used in psychotherapy and medical training where students and/or colleagues observe an experienced therapist or physician work with a patient in front of the group, but those outside the fishbowl are strictly observers. In this application, Wolfgang’s central and defining point -- controversy and duality, does not apply. He has described a particular variation of the fishbowl for a particular purpose -- having people of vastly different perspectives articulate their differences and understand each other.” (Michael Patton, EVALTALK list server, Jan. 8th 2005)

We would like to thank Michael for these important hints which make it very obvious that the fish bowl is an arrangement which can be used in evaluation for several purposes as

- data collection
- interpretation/generating conclusions and recommendations
- communicating/reporting
- teaching/learning evaluation

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Our Experience with the Fishbowl-DC Method

The following text is restricted to the first possible function of the fish-bowl method. To address it in an unambiguous way we call it Fishbowl Data Collection (Fishbowl DC) Method. First we describe the evaluation projects, where we have used the Fishbowl DC Method. Subsequent to a short presentation of the Fishbowl-Data Collection Method we discuss the type of evaluation questions the Fishbowl DC Method is appropriate to answer.

Two cases where we applied the Fishbowl DC method

So far, Univation did apply the Fishbowl method in two evaluation projects. In these two cases local authorities or welfare organisations cooperate in a new organisation form.

Pilot project “Social Agencies” in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), 11 sites, duration 2001 to 2004, main stakeholders: local authorities and welfare associations. ²

Pilot project “Welfare Consortium” in NRW
3 sites, duration 2004 to the beginning of 2005, main stakeholders: local authorities and agencies controlled by the Federal Employment Office. ³

In particular, insight should be gained and recommendations should be derived from the pilot projects for a future practice, which will be established as a regular scheme in 2005 in the state of NRW and throughout Germany. Background is the labour market reform in Germany. ⁴

In both cases, the purpose of the evaluation was to gain knowledge for future common standards (result use) as well as to support the regular ongoing cooperation and coordination processes amongst different organisations, which were involved (process use).

The following strained initial situation was triggering for the use of the Fishbowl DC method:

In the first case, the relationship between local authorities (which are the main sponsors at the same time) and independent agencies/ institutions was characterised by conflicts of interest and distrust. The welfare associations worried about their independence being cut by the local authorities and the new organisation model, which intends to reduce expenses. If representatives had been interviewed individually or in separate

² http://www.sozialagenturen.nrw.de/index.html
³ http://www.hartz.nrw.de/arbeitsgemeinschaften/arbeitsgemeinschaften-fs.htm
⁴ http://www.german-embassy.org.uk/Agenda_2010_brochureengl.pdf
groups, likely one group would have whitewashed the issue, whereas the other group would have exclusively complained and both sides would have used the data collection for promoting their interests, biasing the 'data' we were looking for. With methods of oral or written interviews or the usual group interview no valid and useful data could have been obtained. Therefore, the data collection was designed to enable a controlled interaction between the two parties. The main emphasis was to initiate a social discussion forum, which allowed a constructive evaluation of the programme, expressed by both sides. This was also to identify realistic solutions for the advancement of the cooperation.

The main target in the second case, the consolidation of the municipal welfare agencies and the federally financed work authorities, was to bring together persons in charge who were involved in the programme realisation. The stakeholders originate from diverse organisation cultures with partly different values and principles. The data collection aims at assessing the cooperation process und finding realistic an viable recommendations for its improvement. This veers towards an “interactive” process evaluation.

**Short description of the Fishbowl DC-Method**

The essential features of the Fishbowl method can be described as follows:

The metaphor fishbowl originates from the spatial arrangement of chairs and the basic communication rule:

There are two circles of chairs:
- one inner circle (the 'fishes' who are interacting)
- one outer circle (the spectators, who are restricted to hear what the fishes talk about).

The discussion consists of three sessions with three rounds each; I would like to explain the rounds:
- round 1: Inner Circle (fraction A, quite homogenous) discusses the issue
- round 2: (the other party, fraction B) spectators become fishes and vice versa; the former spectators discuss within the inner circle, starting to answer the question: what did we hear about the positions of the former fishes (fraction A), then taking their own stances
- round 3: An additional empty chair will be put to the inner circle (still fraction B sitting there); as soon as one person from the outer circle takes the empty chair the discussion stops until someone has left his/her inner chair.

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5 The interactive function is one of the five evaluation functions according to Owen/ Rogers (1999): The evaluation provides intermediate results primarily to the process quality during the program putting into action and supports the fine tuning in the program course (Univation 2005, http://www.univation.org/glossar/index.php)
Between the Fishbowl DC Method and the focus group format there are some similarities and some substantial differences. The most different point is that you bring together people with very controversial opinions/positions ...., so duality instead of heterogeneity is the group forming pattern. Therefore you can get data you cannot get easily by other methods, i.e. concerning the areas of consensus, potential consensus, dissent ....

Evaluation questions which can be answered by the Fishbowl DC Method

A generic fishbowl evaluation question is "How are the cooperation relations between fraction A and fraction B."

We think the Fishbowl DC method to be adequate for knowledge generating and formative, may be also for summative purposes. Questions, we already answered by using the fishbowl-method in the two projects are as follows:

Fishbowl I: Discussion with representatives of the social agencies from both sides
- How do the both organisations judge the putting into action of the social agencies and their impacts?
- Which impeding and promoting conditions do they see for the future cooperation between public authorities and NGOs in the social welfare field?

Fishbowl II: Discussion representing the federal work administration and local social administration
- What are central mutual expectations and attitudes which must adequately be perceived and taken into account in the preparations for and execution of the cooperation?
- Which conditions between Federal Employment Office and local authorities are promoting the success for the cooperation?
- By which measures and strategies you can contribute that an acceptable, trusting work relation between stakeholders of the social and work management arises?

Invitation for questions and comments

We would like to improve our theory and practice on the Fishbowl DC method and invite other evaluators to share their experiences and ask their questions.

Please send your emails to Susanne.maeder@univation.org

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