

Transformative Evaluation case study: Evaluation of Student Colleagues scheme

December 2023

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Most Significant Change/Transformative Evaluation

Impact Evaluation with Small Cohorts: [Methodological Guidance \(p. 47-52\)](#)

Case Study

This Most significant Change/Transformative Evaluation was conducted as part of a TASO programme to pilot the use of a series of small n methodologies within widening participation (WP).

Methodological Guidance

Impact Evaluation with Small Cohorts: Methodological Guidance (pp.47–52)

Davis, R. and Dart, J. 2005. *The most significant change (MSC) technique: A guide to its use*. PDF available at

[https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Rick-Davies-](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Rick-Davies-3/publication/275409002)

[3/publication/275409002](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Rick-Davies-3/publication/275409002) [The 'Most Significant Change' MSC Technique A Guide to Its Use/links/553bd3b60cf29b5ee4b87d86/The-Most-Significant-Change-MSC-Technique-A-Guide-to-Its-Use.pdf](#)

Cooper, Sue. "Transformative evaluation: organisational learning through participative practice." *The Learning Organization* 21, no. 2 (2014): 146-157.

Most significant Change/Transformative Evaluation case study: Plymouth Marjon University's Student Colleagues Scheme

Programme overview

Programme Context

A small institution, Plymouth Marjon University (PMU) was granted degree-awarding powers in 2013.

The Student Colleague (SC) scheme was developed in 2019 in the context of the university's Access and Participation Plan (APP), which identified gaps in student employability outcomes for students in POLAR4 Q1 and 2 compared to Q3-5 and students with and without a declared disability. Acknowledging that a student's access to quality employability experiences can be limited, particularly in cases of

disadvantage and/or disability, the scheme offers a range of university-based, paid graduate-level employment opportunities open to student applications.

Evaluation Context

At the time of the study, the SC scheme's implementation was in flux; efforts to improve the scheme meant that revisions, changes and additional activities were either in progress or planned. Further, not all of the stakeholders contributed to the development of the initial Theory of Change.

The project team chose to use Transformative Evaluation (TE), a fork of the Most Significant Change (MSC) methodology, to evaluate the impact of the programme.

TE is a qualitative evaluation method that examines practice in its natural settings to make sense of the outcomes and processes in terms of the meanings people bring to it (Cooper, 2017). TE has specific qualities that the project team felt made it appropriate to scrutinise, question, and reinforce the existing Theory of Change and to explore the programme outcomes:

- TE uses story generation to expose the experiences recipients have of a practice. These stories become the subject of a series of critically reflective activities that include relevant stakeholders who focus on the learning that takes place for those stakeholders and the organisations they are part of. This enables evaluators to identify important processes, relationships, and events that influence the success of the scheme, but are hard to quantify and are poorly captured using traditional evaluation techniques.
- TE offers a transparent, inclusive, and democratic way to generate, analyse, and respond to stories, and promotes collaborative accountability by exploring the issues surfaced by stories within a shared and structured format. These qualities suited this evaluation as logic chains between the intervention and target metrics were yet to be fully developed. TE supported this articulation and helped identify which aspects of the scheme led to intended outcomes of interest.
- TE enables practitioners to become evaluators and support their professional development through hands-on experience and reflective practice. Engaging more staff in research and evaluation activities is one of PMU's strategic aims.
- TE brings to the fore voices of marginalized and underrepresented groups. This was particularly relevant to the target population of this evaluation, which included students who are underrepresented in HE.

Although TE is related to Most Significant Change methodology, the process and series of steps vary. MSC is often used in large-scale interventions, such as international development. As used here, TE is well adapted to smaller-scale projects. For a useful comparison between TE and MSC see the PMU local evaluation report, p.19.

Initial Theory of Change / logic model development

The first stage in this evaluation process was to develop a Theory of Change mapping out what is known or assumed about how the programme delivers its outcomes. In this case, the initial step was to develop a programme logic model.

The project team developed a logic model for the scheme as a starting point. This was developed through an interview with the SC strategy group lead. It mapped project implementation and served as a context for the stories collected from programme participants.

The programme team used an iterative approach to develop the Theory of Change and undertook the following activities:

- A desk review of the scheme's documentation.
- A brief review of meta-analysis studies relevant to the intervention.
- The logic model was shared with the rest of the strategy group members. The team conducted online one-to-one interviews with four members of the Student Colleagues Steering Group (SCSG). This allowed for an iterative process in which feedback from each interview was incorporated into the next version of the logic model. Timing issues meant that it was not possible to conduct a workshop with the full SCSG or interview more SCSG members.
- Members of the SCSG provided written feedback on the final draft of the programme logic model and narrative.

Step 1: Story Generation

The story generation phase is based on a reflective discussion with programme participants. Story generators (practitioners trained in TE) ask them to focus on positive changes that occurred because of their participation in the intervention.

- Story generators (evaluators) elicited significant change stories through a reflective discussion with scheme participants, focusing on positive changes. Evaluators are practitioners who work on or deliver the scheme.
- Story generators wrote the story in the words of the storyteller during the discussion, and then agreed it with them. Stories are usually around a paragraph long, approximately four to five sentences. This is considered not too short that it excludes crucial details and not too long that the main message / Most Significant Change (MSC) is lost.

Step 2: Evaluator analysis

In this stage, evaluators review the collected contribution stories, sorting them into thematic domains before identifying the most significant story in each domain.

- Evaluators selected and analysed the collected significant change stories.
- Evaluators allocated stories into thematic domains based on their content and agreed a title for each domain. Domains are usually broad and categorise the changes that participants narrate. This process was inductive and agreed collectively.

To create the domains:

- Each evaluator read aloud the stories they had collected. Stories are read as they were written without any comment or editing by the evaluator.
- Evaluators discussed and agreed on domain names / titles that best describe the story content.
- The stories were read out loud again and each one was placed in the most relevant domain.

Domains include both the domain name and a description. In this case, thematic domains included:

- 'Improved employment'; taking part in the scheme provided skills and opportunities that ultimately led to the participant gaining meaningful employment.
 - 'Interpersonal relationships'; the experience of working with another participant or staff member and the influence this had for the individual.
 - 'Environment'; the structured and scaffolded support and activities and mentoring that PMU provides for participants.
- Evaluators collectively selected the most significant story for each domain by reaching a consensus and explained their rationale for selecting it.
Examples of the reasons for choosing a particular story for a domain included:
 - The group agreed that [name of participant] story was the best example of how the environment was critical to the programme experience. [Name of participant] describes how the support and opportunities provided by the scheme gave them [the participant] several opportunities through which they could develop self-empowerment.
 - The group agreed that [name of participant] story was the best example of improved employment prospects as they attributed their current role directly to participating in the Student Colleagues scheme. From this they developed autonomy and independence as well as specialised knowledge and a passion for their work.
 - Co-construction of stories took place at this point; Evaluators added their interpretation of the participant's journey based on their experience of working with them. Evaluators thus become co-authors of the story.

Step 3: Stakeholder Selection and Feedback

Both TE and MSC story collection phases include a selection process involving programme strategic decision makers.

- The scheme's strategic stakeholder group met to discuss and select a single story from across the domains as the 'best' one representing the Student Colleagues scheme. They also documented the reasons for choosing that particular story.
- An experienced TE facilitator led the meeting and supported the group to make decisions using consensus building.

Step 4: Meta-evaluation

TE and MSC both include a reflective meta-evaluation phase in which evaluators review the evaluation process and consider opportunities to improve it in the future.

- Evaluators met to reflect on their experience of using TE and identify potential improvements for the next round of its implementation.

Additional Data Collection Phase

To supplement the TE evaluation process, the project team also added a phase of qualitative data collection through additional interviews with steering group members and evaluators and focus groups with strategic stakeholders.

In their report, the project team noted that 'TE is not sufficient on its own for evaluation purposes and should be complemented by other methods' (p.26). The project team gathered additional qualitative data through 17 semi-structured interviews with the programme steering group, 4 interviews or the solicitation of written feedback from evaluators and a focus group with strategic stakeholders.

The team analysed this data employing Saldana's (2016) qualitative analysis approach, which acknowledges the possibility that research bias could influence analysis.

To produce the evaluation findings, the project team synthesized this additional data collection with the outcomes of the story collection and selection process.

Evaluation outcomes

The outcomes presented below are derived from the TE story collection process activities outlined above. In most cases, the team's understanding of the initial thematic domain was supplemented and enriched with data from the additional round of qualitative research. Taken together this data indicated that the Student Colleagues programme:

- increased graduate employment outcomes.
- improved participants' career decision-making and career decisiveness.
- increased participants' self-efficacy.
- improved participants' employability skills.
- resulted in a positive working experience for participants.
- was designed to give participants access to the scheme.
- improved participants' understanding of the scheme.

- improved potential participants' awareness of the SC scheme.

Adaptions to the methodology

The project team adapted the TE methodology to support the robustness of the study, the HE context and HE related ethical considerations. For more detail see the PMU local evaluation (pp.44-53):

- Story generators (evaluators) did not have a working relationship with the storytellers (participants) and not all were professionals working on the programme.
- Sampling was not positively biased.
- Story generators did not co-construct any of the stories. They contextualised the stories by providing some background offered by the storytellers during their conversation, or, in a few cases, offered their personal understanding of the situation of the storyteller, if they were acquainted with them.

Reflections from using the Transformative Evaluation methodology

The project team reported that the benefits of using TE methodology were that it:

- Solidified parts of the scheme's logic model and Theory of Change by improving the relevance and accuracy of some of the scheme's outcome measures and by revealing mechanisms of change and logic chains.
- Enabled the identification and documentation of the outcomes participants believed they had achieved as a result of the programme.
- Indicated whether some of the intended outcomes have been achieved.
- Provided powerful accounts of the impact of under-represented groups in HE through the use of stories written in their own words.
- Encouraged collaboration between staff who may not usually interact within the organisation.
- Engaged stakeholders in meaningful conversations.
- Allowed for adaptations to take place so that the methodology fits the context and needs of the impact evaluation carried out.

Meta-evaluation reflection suggested that TE had the potential to:

- Improve the scheme by enabling different stakeholders to participate, reflect and make recommendations. This empowered stakeholders not only to be engaged in the evaluation of the scheme but also decision-making about its future direction.
- Improve stakeholder understanding of the scheme and thereby encourage a more strategic approach to achieving its outcomes.
- Built local capacity to critically reflect.

The team observes, however, that TE requires careful planning and project management, as well as expertise to implement it effectively. Having team members experienced in delivering evaluation studies and TE expertise within the team to guide and support delivery at every step was highly beneficial.

Conclusions

The project team concluded that:

- TE has a place in impact evaluation, amongst other methods. Before using it, stakeholders will have to embrace TE's emphasis on subjectivity, context specificity and commit to staff professional development through reflection. Stakeholders will also be required to iteratively implement improvements.
- The process requires specific knowledge and experience. Peers intending to undertake a TE evaluation will need to carefully plan resources and identify existing TE expertise available to them or develop it within the staff base over time for effective implementation.
- TE was originally developed to evaluate youth work programmes by bringing to the fore the voices of marginalized and underrepresented groups. At the same time, it was designed to empower and support youth work practitioners' professional development as they assume the evaluator role. It was not developed to serve accountability purposes or for the HE context. Further studies are needed to understand the use of TE in an HE context as well as how adaptations to the methodology may support and/or inhibit impact evaluation for accountability purposes. This means that working with TE in this context may need facilitators and evaluators to balance ideology with standard of evidence and strength of claims, as well as with ethical aspects relevant to HE.

References

Cooper, S., 2017. *Participatory evaluation in youth and community work: Theory and practice*. Routledge.

Saldana, J. (2016) *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 3rd Edition, London: Sage.