

Most Significant Change Case Study

Impact Evaluation with Small Cohorts: Methodological Guidance (49–56)

Methodological Steps

Davies, R. and Dart, J. (2005). *The ‘most significant change’ (MSC) technique. A guide to its use.* PDF. Available at https://www.wikifplan.org/WIKIPLAN/1%201%20151%20-%20Most_significant_change_methodology_pa_abril%202005.pdf (Open Access)

Case Study

Dahmen-Adkins, J. and Peterson, H. (2019). Most Significant Change: Closing the Gender Gap in Research. In Paoloni, P., Paoloni, M. and Arduini, S. (Eds) *2nd International Conference on Gender Research*. Academic Conferences and publishing limited. 151–158. Available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332180557_Most_Significant_Change_Closing_the_Gender_Gap_in_Research (Open Access)

Fabricated WP Example

Barkat, S. (2019). Evaluating the impact of the Academic Enrichment Programme on widening access to selective universities: Application of the Theory of Change framework. *British Educational Research Journal*, 45(6) 1160–1185. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3556> (No Open Access version is currently available)

The fabricated example draws on a Theory of Change developed by Barkat (2019) to document an academic enrichment programme for Y12 students. All the details below, however, are fabricated and do not refer either to the intervention or its evaluation as described in the paper.

In the table below, the ‘Case Study’ column breaks down the case study evaluation into a series of methodological steps as described by the [Methodological Guidance](#). In the ‘Fabricated WP Example’ column, we apply the logic of these steps to a hypothetical evaluation of a fabricated widening-participation intervention, to suggest how a Most Significant Change approach to evaluation might unfold when applied to an intervention of this type. The nature of this ‘Small *n*’ approach means that there may be no single ‘correct’ way of applying this methodology. The example given should be considered illustrative rather than a definitive model.

Case Study	Fabricated WP Example
<p>Dahmen-Adkins and Peterson (2019)</p> <p>Outline of paper: This report details the evaluation of a four-year European gender equality project, in which 20 change agents worked to implement gender equality plans in seven different institutions.</p> <p>Key evaluation questions:</p> <p>Individual impacts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What were the changes in knowledge/awareness? ● What were the changes in behaviour? ● What were the changes in daily lives? <p>Institutional impacts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What were the changes in culture? ● What were the changes in practice and policies? ● What were the changes in structures/management? 	<p>There are few published examples of the application of MSC to the evaluation of WP-focused interventions. The example below is a hypothetical model to suggest how this approach could be used in the evaluation of a WP intervention.</p> <p>The starting point for this discussion draws on a Theory of Change documented in Barkat 2019, but the discussion below is based on an entirely fabricated example case study.</p> <p>Outline of paper: The article outlines the development of a Theory of Change approach to evaluating the impact of an academic enrichment programme for disadvantaged young people in Y12.</p> <p>The key research questions informing the fabricated evaluation are: 1) How does the programme impact the participants' view of their own academic capacity? 2) How does the participants' view of their own academic potential relate to their decision-making about whether to apply to selective universities?</p>
Step 1 – Start and raise interest (discretionary)	
<p>This step was not covered in the case study.</p>	<p>The evaluation team decided to adopt an MSC approach to support the further development of the Theory of Change for their academic enrichment programme.</p> <p>They selected key stakeholders whose stories of change they wanted to gather – primarily intervention participants. Two delivery practitioners were selected as champions within the team.</p> <p>The process and aims of the MSC programme were shared with the programme advisory board to gain their buy-in and support.</p>
Step 2 – Establish 'domains of change' (discretionary)	

<p>The evaluators consulted previous literature on the use of the MSC approach for guidance on how best to formulate questions in the story-gathering process.</p> <p>The outcome was a questionnaire and interview guide that asked two key questions.</p> <p>1) Describe a project-related activity/measure in which you took part. Reflect on the most significant change that you personally experienced as a result of participating in the activity. It may be a direct change (you learned something) or an indirect change (you made a change due to the information that you learned). Please explain why this change is important to you. Examples: change in career possibilities and opportunities; change in awareness of gender and gender equality; changes in networks and contacts.</p> <p>2) In your opinion, what has been the most significant change that has occurred in your institution as a result of the project? Please describe why this change is/was important to you. Examples: change in attitudes, climate and culture; change in administrative routines; change in leadership and management; change in the physical environment etc. (153)</p> <p>This limited the domains of change to the individual and the organisation.</p> <p>The target groups were participants in gender equality interventions within each participating institution.</p>	<p>The evaluators were interested in understanding how the academic enrichment programme changed the participants' views of their academic abilities and how they related these abilities to an assessment of their potential to apply to a selective institution. They consulted with the programme advisory board and the delivery practitioner team to refine their thinking on the most relevant domains of change, on which they should focus.</p> <p>These stakeholders reached a consensus and agreed to ask participants to consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What changed in their thinking about their academic ability and potential? ● What changed in their behaviour or approach to their current studies? ● What changed in their thinking about potential university destinations? ● What other changes had they identified?
<p>Step 3 – Define reporting period (discretionary)</p>	
<p>This step was not covered in the case study.</p>	<p>The duration of the academic enrichment programme was six months. The evaluation team was interested in intermediate outcomes, so chose to monitor (collect stories) from participants every two to three weeks depending on the intensity of activities.</p>
<p>Step 4 – Collect stories of change</p>	

The most significant change stories were collected from intervention participants through interviews and questionnaires.

At the end of the project, the same data collection approach and interview structure were used to collect stories from the change agents during an interactive workshop. These questions were supplemented by an additional template designed to further unpack individual-level changes by distinguishing between informal and formal changes, and whether collective changes were tangible or intangible (154).

The key question domains were reframed as specific open questions:

- Looking back over the past three weeks, what do you think has been the most significant change in the way that you think about your school/course work and academic development?
- Looking back over the last three weeks, what do you think has been the most significant change in the way that you approach your school/course work or your education in general?
- Looking back over the last three weeks, what do you think has been the most significant change in the way that you think about your plans after school/college?
- Looking back over the last three weeks, what other significant changes have you been aware of?

The evaluation team alternated between two different ways of collecting significant change stories: an online survey followed by a short online interview with non-programme delivery staff. The final data-gathering session was conducted as a group discussion.

In each case, at the end of their change story, the storyteller was asked to explain the significance of the story from their point of view.

Every month, delivery practitioners were asked to write their own stories of significant change and to reflect on the changes they were witnessing in participants and on their own thinking about the programme delivery:

- Looking back over the past three weeks, what do you think has been the most significant change in the participants you work with?
- Looking back over the past three weeks, what do you think has been the most significant change in your approach to delivery?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Looking back over the last three weeks, what other significant changes have you been aware of?
Step 5 – Review stories within the organisational hierarchy	
<p>The most significant change stories were gathered by each institutional team and sent to the central monitoring team for analysis. The case study does not detail how this selection process was conducted.</p>	<p>Stories from the participants were given to the delivery practitioners for selection and review.</p> <p>Stories from the delivery practitioners were given to the programme managers for selection and review.</p> <p>At each of these stages, the selection panels were asked to review all of the stories as a group and collectively agree on what they saw as the most significant story to pass to the team above them. Following each selection round, the panel was asked to document the criteria they used to make their final selection. Where the panel was not able to make a clear decision, they were asked to agree on scoring criteria and score each story.</p> <p>These filtered stories were then taken to the programme advisory board.</p> <p>Consequently, there were two levels of selection:</p> <p>Participant change stories <i>selected by</i> Delivery practitioners</p> <p>Delivery practitioner change stories <i>selected by</i> Programme managers</p> <p><i>Both sets of change stories were given to Programme Advisory Board.</i></p>
Step 6 – Provide stakeholders with regular feedback about the review process	

This step was not covered in the case study.	Each selection panel reported back to the storytellers, providing an overview of the stories they had reviewed and an explanation as to why the most significant story had been selected. This helped storytellers to understand how their stories were being used.
Step 7 – Establish a process for verifying the stories if necessary (discretionary)	
This step was not covered in the case study.	A member of the selection panel discussed the most significant story with the teller of that change story to ask for any additional details and ensure that the information provided had been correctly understood and interpreted.
Step 8 – Quantify surrounding information (discretionary)	
The central monitoring team quantified the stories based on the change domain, age and gender of the participants.	<p>As part of the verification process, and particularly for delivery practitioner stories, storytellers were asked to quantify relevant aspects of their stories:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How many participants were involved in the significant change? ● How widespread did it appear to be? ● Was it possible to quantify any elements of the change (for example, through an increase in exam marks)?
Step 9 – Conduct secondary analysis and meta-monitoring (discretionary)	
<p>The central monitoring team carried out a secondary systematic content analysis of the subject and theme of the stories.</p> <p>Dahmen-Adkins and Peterson (2019) reported that, although these were short, often only a page or two of written text, they provided ‘thick descriptions’ of content and change processes (155).</p> <p>Individual significant change stories revealed changes in knowledge and awareness (of local and national policies, gender stereotypes, inequalities and changes), in behaviour (career motivation, commitment to gender equality) and in daily lives (changes to work-life, empowerment, increased networks, engaging support and role models and increasing visibility of research) (155).</p>	<p>After the final selection process, the team of evaluators undertook an additional analysis of the most significant stories at each level. They compared them with the significant stories gathered in previous rounds to identify development and changes across time.</p> <p>They also mapped changes in the context and delivery of the programme (e.g. a change in workshop content), to link significant change stories with specific programme components in place at the time. At the same time, the thematic content of participant stories was compared with the content of delivery practitioner stories to identify points of thematic connection or disconnection.</p> <p>A list of key themes was extracted from each phase of story-telling.</p>

<p>Institutional changes included changes in organisational culture (increased transparency and openness, visibility and legitimacy of gender issues and awareness of gender) and practice and policies (new gender initiatives, recruitment practices, fair salary schemes and the adoption of new indicators, changes in leadership, development of networks and increased collaboration) (156).</p>	<p>The evaluation team also compiled a meta-monitoring list at each selection stage, recording the number of stories submitted, which participants/delivery staff had submitted stories and the criteria for selection.</p>
<p>Step 10 – Revise MSC process (discretionary)</p>	
<p>This step was not covered in the case study.</p>	<p>At the end of the process (the conclusion of the academic enrichment programme), the evaluation team reviewed the MSC process with participants and delivery practitioners, to assess the effectiveness of the questions asked, and the appropriateness of the reporting schedule.</p> <p>Following the submission of the evaluation report to the programme advisory board, the evaluation team asked for feedback on the usefulness and relevance of the findings and recommendations listed in the report.</p>
<p>Conclusion</p>	
<p>The evaluators concluded that the MSC technique made it possible to systematise the changes required to close gender gaps and illustrated the positive impact of the project on participating individuals and institutions. The change domains included knowledge and awareness, behaviour and daily life, culture, policy structure and management.</p> <p>They concluded that the MSC approach was a valuable monitoring tool that complemented more conventional monitoring and evaluation methods. In particular, it was viewed as flexible and capable of being adapted to fit a range of different change evaluation projects.</p>	<p>The evaluators concluded that the MSC approach had provided them with a structured and helpful approach for gathering data from both programme participants and practitioners.</p> <p>The outcomes had given them a rounded and thematically consistent view of programme implementation and delivery and the programme’s direct impact on participants. It had flagged some impactful programme components (such as workshop facilitators’ selection of material relevant to participants’ academic interests) that were not part of the formal implementation, but which had evolved through the relationship between practitioners and participants and had a positive impact on the changes observed.</p>