The Good, The Bad & The Ugly: Learning Our Way Through Complex Social Issues

CUP Annual Celebration Event
Edmonton, Alberta
October 19, 2017

Working with this title...
The Main Points

1. Complex issues require **adaptive** – rather than linear – responses in order to be effective.
2. The **stakes** of employing an adaptive response are high.
3. The extent to which learning and evaluation in addressing complex social issues is good bad or ugly depends on the **orientation** towards evaluation.
4. The **conditions** for complexity-friendly evaluation not great but are getting better.
5. Social innovators, and the evaluators, researchers, funders and policy makers that support them, can **accelerate** the development and adoption of complexity-friendly approaches.

What is the first **word** or **feeling** that comes to mind when you hear the word **evaluation**?
#1: Complex issues require adaptive – not simple or cookie cutter -- responses.

**Grumpy**
Dealing with complexity is an inefficient and unnecessary waste of time, attention and mental energy. There is never any justification for things being complex when they could be simple. **Edward de Bono**

**Practical**
Stop trying to change reality by attempting to eliminate complexity. **David Whyte**.

For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple, and wrong.” **H. L. Mencken**

Fools ignore complexity. Pragmatists suffer it. Some can avoid it. Geniuses remove it. **Alan Perlis**

Some problems are so complex that you have to be highly intelligent and well informed just to be undecided about them.** Laurence J. Peter**
Take a Breath

Abandon the urge to simplify everything, to look for formulas and easy answers, and to begin to think multi-dimensionally, to glory in the mystery and paradoxes of life, not to be dismayed by the multitude of causes and consequences that are inherent in each experience -- to appreciate the fact that life is complex.

— M. Scott Peck

... take another breath

The capacity to tolerate complexity and welcome contradiction, not the need for simplicity and certainty, is the attribute of an explorer. Centuries ago, when some people suspended their search for absolute truth and began instead to ask how things worked, modern science was born. Curiously, it is by abandoning the search for absolute truth that science has began to make progress, opening the material universe to human exploration.

H. Pagels
Finally ...

• Life is a continuing process of making adjustments and creative responses in a world too complex to be predictable. But institutions insist not only upon their illusions of predictability, but their systems of control by which they imagine they can direct the world to their ends. This is why institutions have always aligned themselves with the forces of power, in order to compel the rest of nature – particularly mankind – to conform to their interests.

B. Shaffer

What is the difference between:

• baking a cake;
• sending a rocket to the moon;
• raising a child?
Develop common ground, compromise or compete.

Follow the ‘best practice’ recipe.

Use expertise, experiment and build knowledge and formulas.

Create stability, look for opportunities to innovate.

Good framing, principles and patterns of practice

Example of an Adaptive Response: Tackling Homelessness in Surrey British Columbia
Principles to Tackle Complex Issues

Experimental

Participatory

Systemic Thinking & Action

Adapted from: REOS

#2:
The stakes of using the right approach to complex issues is high.
# The Effects of Poor Fit to Complex Issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Simple</th>
<th>Serial consumer of “best practice”; fragmented and cookie cutter or recipe approaches.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Complicated</td>
<td>Not enough data, time, resources or expertise; perpetual planning; elaborate plans that have to be sold and unevenly implemented.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>‘Demonize’ or ‘enemify’ the “other” stakeholders; low leverage compromises.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaotic</td>
<td>Avoid the problem altogether; try to “impose” solution, bet on a charismatic leaders</td>
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### South Africa

*(Complicated Lens)*

*Meaningful solutions require sophisticated, integrated and expert driven national health care systems.*

### Brazil

*(Complexity Lens)*

*How do we work together, get creative, and experiment with new ways to address root causes?*

### Another Case Study

*Similar HIV Rates*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>South Africa</strong></th>
<th><strong>Brazil</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Our sophisticated, integrated national health care systems is our major tool.</td>
<td>• We need to find ways to use the resources we have – including those most affected and non-traditional stakeholders - to respond to the problem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• We cannot provide treatment to all when the drug costs are so high.</td>
<td>• How can we provide drugs to all by finding ways to reduce drug costs?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• We cannot afford resource to manage treatment compliance.</td>
<td>• What are some of the ‘rules’ that prevent innovative solutions?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• With limited resources, focus more on prevention than treatment.</td>
<td>• How do we mix prevention and treatment in our strategy?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• It will therefore take a long time for the problem to work itself through.</td>
<td>• How do keep a focus on long term outcomes while generating short term wins?</td>
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**Adaptive Responses in Brazil**

- **Systemic**: declared HIV a crisis, produced – and distributed for free -- “generic drugs” (cost reduced by 90%).

- **Collaborative**: worked with Church clergy and alternative media to educate people about HIV and promote “safe sex”.

- **Experimental**: created easy-to-follow drug protocols with citizen groups that allowed illiterate patients to administer own treatment with help with “local” and “trustworthy” hubs (e.g. NGO’s, etc.)
“You don’t see something until you have the right metaphor to let you perceive it.”

Thomas Kuhn

Complex Issues & the Dark Side of the Parking Lot...
#3: The extent to which learning and evaluation in addressing complex social issues is good, bad or ugly depends on the orientation towards evaluation.

## A Brief (and Simplified) History

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Period</th>
<th>Evaluation Paradigm</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1950s-80s</td>
<td>Formative</td>
<td>Improving a model.</td>
<td>What is and is not working? How can we refine the model to increase effects, reduce costs or make implementation easier?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Summative</td>
<td>Judging the merit or worth of a model.</td>
<td>Does the program meet people’s needs? What are the outcomes compared to benefit? Should we drop, sustain or scale this program?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>Assessing ‘fidelity’ of model implementation &amp; progress.</td>
<td>Is implementation following the plan? Are funds being used for intended purposes? Is program reaching the right people? Are goals &amp; targets being met? Are quality control mechanisms in place?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21st century</td>
<td>Developmental</td>
<td>Creating, developing or radically adapting a model.</td>
<td>What are we learning about the problem or challenge and its context? What are areas of promise? What is our ‘theory of change’ and implications for design? What are the emerging outcomes? What do we do now?</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Three Orientations

Traditional Evaluation: Neo-Newtonians
- Often operate with mechanistic understanding of the world. Develop, test and if appropriate scale best practice models through ‘gold standard’ designs.

Accountability Evaluation: Misguided Stewards & Administrators
- Link the investment and use of resources to processes more shaped by policy, political and administrative requirements than the change initiative.

Developmental Evaluation: Adaptive Pluralists
- Embrace complexity, diversity, emergence while trying to tackle wicked social issues; pull together evaluations that weave together whatever methods are appropriate and practical.

#1: The Influence of Purpose

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<tr>
<th>Accountability-Based Evaluation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Aims to hold social innovators to account for the use of resources, high fidelity to an original plan, and delivery of results.</td>
<td>Aims to improve or judge the merit or wroth of model and produce generalizable findings across time and space.</td>
<td>Aims to produce context specific findings and to inform ongoing innovation and adaptation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ugly</td>
<td>Bad</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Perverse Consequence: Pre-mature Strategy/Theory of Change

At the logic model repair shop ...

So, I'm guessing this is for a comprehensive program-level intervention

The Reality: Hunches of Change

"I think you should be more explicit here in step two."
#2: Evaluation Design

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<tr>
<td>Measures success against pre-determined goals with a strong preference for quantitative and reductionist data and methods.</td>
<td>Measures success against pre-determined goals with robust fixed, up front, research designs.</td>
<td>Develops measures and monitoring mechanisms as learnings and goals evolve.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Ugly | Bad | Good |

Big Design/Waterfall vs. Agile Designs

Waterfall

- Requirements
- Design
- Development
- Testing
- Deployment

Big outcome at end

Agile

- Requirements
- Design
- Deployment
- Reach
- Design
- Deployment
- Reach
- Design
- Deployment

Cumulative outcomes
#3: Dealing with Cause & Effect

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<tr>
<td>Design evaluation based on linear cause-and-effect models of change.</td>
<td>Design evaluation based on linear cause-and-effect models of change; seeks to assess the attribution of a model to outcomes.</td>
<td>Designs the evaluation to capture complex cause-effect relationships, interdependences and emergent connections; seeks out contribution.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ugly | Bad | Good

Attrition Versus Contribution

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Attribution Analysis</th>
<th>Contribution Analysis</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employs a narrow-angle lens that assumes a linear cause-and-effect relationship between intervention activities and observed changes.</td>
<td>Embraces a wide-angle lens on the non-linear cause-and-effect relationships between intervention and non-intervention factors that influence changes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asks: &quot;To what extent did our intervention cause the change?&quot;</td>
<td>Asks: &quot;To what extent did our intervention contribute to the change?&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeks to prove the link between activities and change.</td>
<td>Seeks to establish a plausible link between the intervention and change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privileges experimental design as the 'gold standard' methodology.</td>
<td>Emphasizes triangulation of methods and stakeholder verification of findings.</td>
</tr>
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### #5: Capturing Effects & Outcomes

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<tr>
<td>Tracks progress on intended outcomes.</td>
<td>Tracks progress on intended outcomes, with some effort to surface unintended outcomes.</td>
<td>Seek to find out the splatter of effects – intended and unintended, positive and negative – generated by interventions.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Ugly** | **Bad** | **Good**

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#### Unanticipated Outcomes Illustrated

- **Cats in Borneo**
  - [Link](https://ed.ted.com/on/MypuABMk)

- **Moonwalking Bears**
  - [Link](https://vimeo.com/148247749)
#5: Understanding Success

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<tr>
<td>Renders definitive judgements of success or failure.</td>
<td>Seeks to converge on general statement of relative merit or worth.</td>
<td>Multiple and relative perspectives on success.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Criteria of Value**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Criteria of Value</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Improvement</td>
<td>The number of stayed cases has dropped significantly since the hiring. This is good!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progress Towards Target</td>
<td>The government did not establish a formal target for reducing the backlog or reducing the number of stayed cases, so it’s difficult to say whether the result is “on target”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benchmarking Against Others</td>
<td>The Province of Alberta continues to have the highest percentage of stayed charges compared to other provinces, as well as the lowest number of Crown prosecutors per capita of any province. We do not compare well against our peers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting A Standard or Principle</td>
<td>A spokesperson Alberta Crown Attorney argues that the progress is unacceptable that any case that is not tried within [x] months violates victims’ and the accused’s rights to a timely and fair trial, as well as the standards of the legal profession.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>360 Degree Perspective</td>
<td>The union representing Crown Prosecutors reports that while more prosecutors are required to deal with the backlog, they are happy with the decrease in backlogs and their members report slightly less work related stress. Tough-on-crime activists and victims’ rights groups are upset that there are still “criminals walking the street”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A taxpayer “watchdog” complains that the $15 million-dollar investment into hiring prosecutors is simply wasteful spending and argues that the Justice Ministry needs restructuring in order to become more cost-efficient.</td>
</tr>
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#6: Navigating Failure

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<tr>
<td>Engenders fear of failure and its consequences.</td>
<td>Surfaces a general curiosity about what happened and why.</td>
<td>Encourages hunger for further learning and adaptation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

intelligent failure learning & innovation loop

- **FAILURE**
  - Instinctive, often dysfunctional reactions

- **INFORMED RISK TAKING & INNOVATION**
  - Incremental change
  - Learning not formally applied in practice

- **IMPROVED ITERATIONS**

- **MAXIMIZED LEARNING**

- **FAIL FORWARD**
  - move
  - exit
Maximizing Learning

Types of Failure
Amy C Edmondson
( Harvard Business Review, April 2015)

Deviance
Institution
Inability
Process inadequacy
Process challenge
Process complexity
Process surprise
Inertness
Inertness
Inertness

Blameworthy Failure
Praiseworthy Failure

Exemplary Culture Building
#7: Accountability

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<tr>
<td>Focused on – and directed to – external authorities and funders.</td>
<td>Focused on – and directed to – external authorities and funders.</td>
<td>Centered on innovators deep commitment to change and data-based learning and adaptation.</td>
</tr>
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Enabling Eco-systems

- Many philanthropic funders say that they value learning and want to know what works and doesn’t work, then, in the next sentence, they reaffirm their bottom-line thinking about accountability: “You (and we) will ultimately be judged by whether you attain your goals and achieve results.” This tension between learning and accountability is seldom recognized, much less openly discussed. Accountability messages trump learning messages every time. As surely as night follows day, this attitude leads those receive funds to exaggerate results and hide failures – the antithesis of genuine reality testing and shared learning. Funders need to engage in their own thoughtful reality testing about the message they’re sending and the incentives (and disincentives) they’re providing to learning.
#4

The conditions for complexity-friendly evaluation are not great but are getting better.

The Resiliency of the Machine Metaphor

- I’m simply stunned at the resilience of the mechanical metaphor. Policymakers and planners are still pushing the machine metaphor for health interventions. This mechanistic approach, that all we have to do is fix some faulty parts in the system, has deep roots and is hard to get past. The so-called evidence-based approach to [complex issues] has become all-powerful, tied to and grounded in a mandate to make things predictable and controllable.

Uneven Conditions for Developmental Evaluation

Learning Culture?

Adaptive Authority?

Complex Situation

The practice of adaptive leadership and developmental evaluation is expanding rapidly.

International Development

Banking & Finance

Military Affairs & Security

Human Services & Public Admin (a hint)
An Exemplary Practice: The Blandin Family Foundation

#5
Social innovators, and the evaluators, researchers, funders and policy makers that support them, can accelerate the development and adoption of complexity-friendly approaches.
Complexity-Based, Developmental Evaluation

We are HERE

- Innovators: 2.5%
- Early adopters: 13.5%
- Early majority: 34%
- Late majority: 34%
- Laggards: 16%

iPhone 1.0: Success or Failure?
Living In Two Worlds

It's difficult to build something new while protecting – and sometimes providing hospice – to the old ways of doing things.

Meg Wheatley

Four Simple Suggestions

1. Embrace a complexity lens and promote participatory, systemic and experimental practices.

2. Commit to employing complexity friendly, developmental evaluation approach.

3. Identify – and address – systemic practices that short-circuit – rather than support – developmental evaluation (e.g., procurement practices).

4. Share your story with other pioneers and early adopters to strengthen the network.
The Main Points

1. Complex issues require adaptive – rather than linear – responses in order to be effective.
2. The stakes of employing an adaptive response are high.
3. The extent to which learning and evaluation in addressing complex social issues is good bad or ugly depends on the orientation towards evaluation.
4. The conditions for complexity-friendly evaluation not great but are getting better.
5. Social innovators, and the evaluators, researchers, funders and policy makers that support them, can accelerate the development and adoption of complexity-friendly approaches.

Complexity & Leadership

For anyone who’s ever wondered, “What am I supposed to do now?”
Resources on Developmental Evaluation


What is most alive for you after today’s session (e.g., a thought, a feeling, a question)?