

# Developing an inclusive approach to the evaluation of networked learning: the ELAC experience

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper we will outline an evaluation approach that was undertaken in the context of the ELAC project. ELAC is an EU funded collaboration between Latin American partners in Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Mexico and European partners in Denmark, Spain and the UK. It is a demonstration project that is assisting the Latin American partners to establish the necessary infrastructure to support online continuing professional education and, in addition, is developing online courses that are intended to be of a networked and collaborative nature. Evolution of project experience will be discussed as it is mirrored in the evolution of the presence of evaluation within the work of the project participants and, more specifically, the development of online courses.

The theory and justification for inclusive evaluation will be outlined and analysed and the design of participant activities will be discussed in the light of the tools and sequence of development of an evaluation approach in practice. The core element of the paper is an account of how participants undertook the development of their own evaluation framework on the basis of the interventions of the evaluation team over time.

## Keywords

Inclusive evaluation, course development, educational change, networked learning

## INTRODUCTION

In this paper the theory and justification for inclusive evaluation will first be outlined and analysed and the design of participant activities will then be discussed in the light of the tools and sequence of development of an evaluation approach in practice.

The core of the paper is the account of how participants undertook the development of their own evaluation framework on the basis of the interventions of the evaluation team over time. We focus in particular on the adaptations and modifications of the basic principles in the light of the hard realities of project life in the three participating countries

## THE MODEL OF EVALUATION WITHIN THE ELAC PROJECT

The approach to evaluation is in the broad tradition of utilization-focused evaluation (see Patton, 1996) that emphasises the use of the evaluation by those commissioning it. It is a modified conception in that it is not the commissioners who are the intended users but the project participants themselves. The utilization dimension however, is retained as a core value. The evaluation approach we advocate could be understood as an 'evaluation for development' as Eleanor Chelmsky (1997, p100) would have it. This means that the evaluative dimension of the project is built into the design and can be justified as evaluative research and reflection in which data gathering was primarily undertaken to obtain resources by which the projects, in this case, courses, might be strengthened and supported. This approach can be distinguished from an accountability imperative. The approach also adopts a stance that positions evaluation as a provider of resources for 'provisional stability' (Saunders et al 2005). This idea suggests an evaluation approach which provides all kinds of data (statistics, captured rehearsals, examples, metaphors, typologies, vignettes, cases, accounts and platforms, ways of working, principles of procedures, routines) that can be used as resources for course designers and innovators in networked learning within ELAC to increase understanding of the change process in which they had been a part and support course design. Our belief is that in the process of change uncertainties arise that can inhibit onward planning and development. By engaging course designers in self-evaluative processes, increased understanding of the change occurs and course designers have diagnostic resources [bridging tools] available on which to create adjustments, strategies and future direction. In other words they have the provisional stability with which to plan. This approach is integrated with a set of evaluative values that we broadly identify as inclusive evaluation. The approach did not aim to determine whether the project is or is not successful, or had achieved some pre-determined desired outcomes. An outcome's desirability was dependent on local context and

conditions; an outcome that is good in one context may be unwelcome in another. Rather, our focus was on providing a process through which meaning is given to outcomes, to support the exploration of practice and understanding of experience. The intention was to make the approach to evaluation *sustainable* so the participants involved also acquired the skills, tools and knowledge that could be transferred and adapted to the ongoing evaluation of their courses as well as continuing initiatives and work initiated during the ELAC project.

Before we introduce the approach proposed it is useful to point out an important distinction. We envisaged working closely with the four teams from Universidad Nacional (UNA), Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Nicaragua (UNAN), Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) and Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (UAM) as co-evaluators. Jointly with the co-evaluators we organized evaluation groups in each institution that involved the project managers, a technical designers, teachers and learning designers. These four groups were a representative sample of all the participants in the project, and they had direct involvement in the generation of evaluation criteria, questions and issues to consider. This inclusive approach to the evaluation encouraged the rest of the participants in the project to be involved through consultation and open discussion of criteria, analysis and findings. In this document we use the term participants to embody all individuals (the evaluation groups, the wider group of participants and the Lancaster evaluation team)

## **THE IDEA OF AN INCLUSIVE EVALUATION WITHIN THE ELAC PROJECT**

The aspirations of the evaluation rested on a modified version of an inclusive evaluation. An extended version of this approach involves the 'end users' in designing aspects of the evaluation. In this case the recipients of the courses were still to be identified at the planning stage of the evaluation and the courses were still in formation. The 'inclusive dimension' therefore lies in the involvement of the development teams from each of the participating countries (Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Mexico) in designing their own evaluations of their projects within a shared and agreed framework.

Inclusively then had its expression in the following four principles of procedure all of which are focused on engagement with the evaluation at the level of the country teams and passing as many 'content based' decisions to them.

The first element of the approach involved the teams in identifying and using key questions, indicators or issues that they considered central to the way in which 'value' might be attributed to their involvement in the project and in the design of courses and finally how it might be used to initiate positive institutional change. It also included a consideration of the values and visions of the project which were identified within the teams. This stance is outlined in participatory approaches; it is outlined graphically in empowerment evaluation at the 'strong' end of the participatory evaluation continuum (see Fetterman et al 1996 and its critique by Patton 97).

Thus the starting point of this inclusive approach is authentication by involving the teams themselves in the key decision making processes associated with the design of their evaluations of aspects of the project. It began by simply asking the programme project participants to identify what their vision of the project was and what key questions might be that cut to the essence of the project's effects on them. As we note above, this differs from Patton's (96) conception in that he emphasises the *commissioner's* role in design. In the ELAC evaluation schema the institutional teams in each country undertook a process of clarification, design process and focusing. After the process of development via the on-line network on 'visioning', on-site workshops took place in which representatives of the project teams were provided with an opportunity to develop evaluation plans and questions or indicators through using 'RUFDATA' (See Saunders 2000) an inclusive evaluation planning tool, and using what we have termed the EPO methodology (Enabling, Process and Outcome) for the definition and use of indicators (see Helsby and Saunders 1993 for the original description). These processes and tools were designed to take participants through a series of activities that would enable them to develop an evaluation plan that contained basic values about the project and specific ends-in-view if it were to be successful. Course teams were free to decide on their own priorities, methods and approaches within this framework. Undertaking this process at the outset of the project had a declamatory dimension. There is from the outset the potential that the participants' interests in the project are embedded into the evaluation design. Once the design activity had taken place, the course teams were supported by a networked learning space based on MOODLE. The evaluation team created an open forum and a differentiated space for each LA institution with their own discussion forum and archives folder. They also enabled a chat space and dedicated opportunities to discuss and decide on indicators and refinements of the RUFDATA planning.

The second characteristic of an inclusive approach to evaluation in ELAC was through agreements on ethical procedures associated with evaluation process. Many evaluation societies have produced guidelines on ethics that emphasise the interactions between stakeholders in an evaluation that express fairness, appropriateness, rights and obligations (see for example those produced by the UK Evaluation Society). We have observed

however, that the less power a 'recipient group' might have, the less access they have to the power of veto, access to evidence gained from them to check accuracy, capacity to exercise worries over anonymity and confidentiality. More involvement can present logistical problems for an evaluation but involves project participants having sight of the data they have provided to check on accuracy and to involve recipients in building interpretations and theories about the data as the evaluation progresses (see Saunders, Charlier and Bonamy 2005 for examples of this process). In the case of the ELAC evaluation model, these ethical considerations were discussed at the outset but the teams themselves were undertaking the evaluations thereby enabling the devolution of power over evaluation process to the participating teams. We offered direct support to the LA institutions by putting in place a mechanism where by we worked as co-evaluators with the pedagogic designers from the four LA universities. The pedagogic designers thus acted as co-evaluators alongside ourselves. We also proposed that they organise inquiry groups at each institution involving the project manager, a technical designer, a teacher, the pedagogical designer and possibly a student. The idea was to have groups in each university that would be a representative sample of all the participants in the project, and to have direct involvement in the generation of evaluation criteria. The devolution of power over the teams in terms of deciding themselves who to involve in the inquiry groups has meant that power considerations have taken place locally at each institution. Thus the size and the roles of the members in each inquiry group has varied across the institutions.

The third characteristic is embedded in the way in which project participants experiences are accurately represented or depicted through evaluation reports and feedback. This is the most declamatory of an inclusive evaluation's aims. Unfortunately however, depictions have not always had a noble history and data freely given can return to wreak havoc. In extreme cases, evaluations have resulted in terrible abuse. More positively, however, unintended effects, legitimate concerns and opportunities to access power can be identified through an evaluation. Powerful accounts of ingenuity and creativity can be made available which can, on occasions, inspire others. The fourth characteristic concerns the contribution to democratic impulses evaluation promises. There has been a long tradition in evaluation circles to situate the evaluative impulse amongst the 'good guys'. To be more explicit, to see evaluation as something that should be done democratically (see comments above on 'inclusive evaluation) and as something that contributes to democracy. We align ourselves with both these aspirations. From the UK evaluators like Barry MacDonald and Saville Kushner (2000) and from the US, strongly associated with the work of Ernie House (1998), we have expressions of the way evaluations have the potential to contribute to democracy through the provision of resources for public debate on policies and programmes and projects

To some extent the first of these aspirations is addressed in the preceding paragraphs and refers to the ethical procedures we have outlined and the involvement of project participants in design. A further democratic consideration concerns the public nature of evaluation outputs and the extent to which the evaluations of publicly funded programmes like ELAC should be in the public domain (see below). Generally speaking the writers cited above argue for a position of 'openness' and freedom of access to afford the public the same knowledge based privileges as commissioners and programme designers. Difficulties can arise where programmes are young or undeveloped and early exposure to negative or critical evaluations can be unfairly damaging. Overall though, the democratic gains to be had in opening up access to information on the way in which public money is spent should be weighed against the tendency to control discussion on policy implementation and limit access to evaluative evidence to the political elite. The idea of evaluation acting as a counter to centralism and control in governance is important. The ELAC project is consciously attempting to circulate and discuss its experience through public debate in conferences and on-line using evaluation products.

Despite this health warning, institutional policy and development can be informed by evaluations and depictions. The use of the ELAC experience in the following vignette is a case in point. At UAM in Mexico the project partners have for some time sought to change the level of support and ideas about virtual education at their institution. This year this came to fruition when the Rector of UAM Azcapotzalco campus, decided to create an office dedicated to virtual education at Azcapotzalco. The objective of the office is to develop institutional capacities in management, training and innovation in the field of the virtual, online education, as part of the of the educational offer at Azcapotzalco. For this purpose and to improve and diversify educational practices in the pedagogic and technological fields, the Office of Virtual Education was created.. ELAC (and arguably its embedded approach to evaluation) was recognized as being significant in bringing about this institutional initiative.

The remainder of this paper includes a series of cases and vignettes that illustrate aspects of the adaptation of the inclusive evaluation approach outlined above.

## SUPPORTING THE 'VISIONING' OF THE PROJECT

In year one and prior to the generation of key questions or criteria to evaluate, we coordinated a values and beliefs elicitation exercise to support the visioning of the project. Our experience indicates that often there is not sufficient time for individuals to articulate explicitly and with the group what their visioning is for a project. Through the process of eliciting and sharing values and beliefs individuals were able to share what they valued and believed about education and networked learning and what they would like to see achieved through the ELAC project. This is a very useful exercise in revealing that individuals often have a combination of positive and negative or limiting beliefs that can impact on their views about networked learning. It provided a way to explore collectively what was important and also any other assumptions and positions considered significant or relevant to the project. The values and beliefs elicitation exercise was first undertaken with the co-evaluators (the pedagogic designers from the LA institutions). This allowed them to experience and use the technique and then afterwards to repeat the exercise with the enquiry teams at each institution. We chose to use a personal account or story of a positive and negative educational experience to surface the values of the participants.

The values that were expressed could be categorized as being related to their values about;

### 1. The Learning Process

Here the Nicaraguan partners, in particular, identified such things as there should be respect of diversity, friendship/companionship, collaboration and reflection.

UAM on the other hand focused more on the importance of allowing for expression of freedom and free thinking in the learning process

### 2. Values of being a 'teacher'

The values that were identified as being important in relation to being a 'teacher' were for example respect, tolerance, professional ethics, sincerity, empathy and discipline and humility

### 3. Values about Knowledge

As with the learning process there were some differences between the Nicaraguan partners and the members of the project who did this exercise at UAM.

For UNAN and UCA they held values about, Sharing new knowledge, knowledge comprehension and the control knowledge

For UAM the expression of freedom and free thinking was again seen as important with respect to knowledge

### 4. Technological Values

The values associated with technology seemed not to be as prevalent or as strong as those with the other 3 areas or levels and could be summarised as work in/with equipment or technology

Participants were also asked to write a purpose statement to reflect their intentions for their work within the ELAC project. The following are some examples of purpose statements that capture the visioning for the project.

*'My purpose within ELAC is to contribute to the construction of a pedagogic model that can give support to the continuous training and development of ICT, in a reflective environment, with respect, participation and companionship'.*

*'My purpose is to create a space of participation that allows the ELAC experience to be valued within the university, the country and at the international level'*

The beliefs work was done through a process of using opposites and different scenarios. The rationale for using this technique in the context of beliefs elicitation is based on the understanding that it can be easier for the individual to think in terms of what they do not believe in, to reaffirm later what they do believe in. This kind of work offers the opportunity to explore issues, assumptions, understandings and experiences that could have an impact and or shape the work in the project. We believe this early work on values purposes and beliefs did support individuals to gain greater clarity, focus, and visioning of the project. Comments made to us suggest that this work assisted the institutional participants to learn more about each other and their reasons for being involved in the project:

*'We have achieved more clarity and consciousness'*

*'I feel closer to each other and more committed'*

*'We can discover that we have common interests, it helps to be identified as a team'*

'It is given much importance to the individual, one is taken into account'

## **UNDERTAKING THE RUFDATA PLANNING**

After the work on values and beliefs we introduced all of the LA partners to the 'RUFDATA' tool. This was done through face to face workshops at each institution and involved the teams working together to answer some key evaluation planning questions. The framework is based on research into evaluation planning which identified the following key reflective questions. The teams were asked to use this framework to begin their evaluation planning and to connect strongly with the logic of the outcomes of their visioning activity. Discussions on these questions were initiated face to face with the teams from each of the Institutions and continued via the MOODLE space.

### **Key questions from Rufdata:**

**Reasons and Purposes for evaluation?** (accountability, development, knowledge building)

**What will be the *Uses* of our evaluation?** (practical, real time uses of the evaluation output, times, people, processes, structures?)

**What will be the *Foci* for our evaluations?** (specification in detail of the aspects of the course teams wish to evaluate, based on priorities, time and resources for evaluation, core interests?)

**What will be our *Data and Evidence* for our evaluations?** (types of data, numbers, cases, vignettes, stories etc?)

**Who will be the *Audience* for our evaluations?** (who is the intended readership of the evaluation outputs?)

**What will be the *Timing* for our evaluations?** (coinciding with key decisions, needs for information reporting cycles?)

**Who should be the *Agency* conducting the evaluations?** (who will be collecting, collating, analysing evidence and forming the evaluation reports?)

Each institution listed different reasons and purposes that were important for them but overall, although only explicitly stated by one institution, a desire to learn from the evaluation work seemed important. In addition, there appears to be common interests in improving teacher training and having greater access to both technical and pedagogical or learning materials and resources.

The uses perceived for the evaluation ranged from helping to inform strategic and organisational decisions, management and planning, to identifying teacher's roles and students needs.

The areas identified for the focus of the evaluation varied. From the human experience (student, tutor) and the general impact and experience of the faculty staff, organization and planning, to those more concerned with technical and human resources and with pedagogy, including pedagogical content, method and research.

The undertaking of their evaluation plan in practice has varied from a high take up of the RUFDATA model to developing a different evaluation approach. For instance one institution approach has been to produce an evaluation RUFDATA plan for each phase of the course development i.e. the enabling, process and outcome (EPO) stages. They have outlined their plans and asked the evaluation team for comments and advise to help them to refine their plans. Their approach has been highly collaborative, reflective and inclusive among their team members. From their perspective it appears that the planning of the *enabling* stage helped the team to get organised and to prioritise activities and tasks.

Working on the *process* stage has it seems helped the institution to become more reflective and to respond appropriately to the needs expressed by the students and the teachers. We know that the values work has directly informed the evaluation questions generated collaboratively among the group. This has allowed them to incorporate their visioning into their evaluation plan. In addition planning each stage separately, has also allowed them to be flexible and to be able to respond quickly to any changes/issues that have come up.

From their experience of the RUFDATA planning this institution has been able to plan evaluation focusing on action research and paying attention to the tools and the role of those involved in the evaluation process. As one participant from this institution said RUFDATA has helped them to provide a wider picture of their work in the project, not only related to the evaluation of the courses.

An example of a different approach has been to undertake an initial evaluation of one of the pilot courses using an online questionnaire with the purpose of capturing the student's experiences of using MOODLE. This was done by one of the teachers before the RUFDATA plan was finalised and since then they have developed two more versions of the RUFDATA plan. Another approach has been to develop first of all a series of questions and indicators before defining the reasons, uses and focus. This has led this group to identify two main evaluation reasons and purposes. This inquiry group has then developed a RUFDATA plan to evaluate the pilot courses, including the students' experience and another RUFDATA plan for self evaluation.

What we have found is that the proposed range of indicators among the institutions were very similar. Some examples include categories such as: interaction, impact on the institution, impact on people, use of resources, etc. However what we have found is that each university has interpreted the EPO framework in a different way. One institution has used the model and has elaborated a RUFDATA plan for each of the enabling, process and outcome stages. Another institution has not differentiated the stages in this way but has planned to address some indicators at the beginning, middle and end of the pilot course. Two other institutions have developed indicators but have not referred explicitly to the EPO framework.

## **LESSONS FROM THE ELAC EVALUATION EXPERIENCE**

The inclusive evaluation approach adopted within ELAC was intended to integrate the evaluation work into the work of the project, the course development and implementation work in particular, and to provide a framework that did not impose a particular view of the world or undermine the cross-cultural collaboration upon which the project was based. The lessons learnt and evaluation outcomes are at this stage only indicative and provisional. Whilst the evaluation approach within ELAC has been integrated into the work of the project from the beginning it is still ongoing and not yet completed.

The main lessons that we have identified to date relate to:

- the situated nature of the approach
- support for collaboration
- sustainability

### **Situated nature of the approach**

A key intention within inclusive evaluation is to allow the work of the evaluation to emerge and to reflect value indicators and criteria that are important to those who are centrally implicated and involved in the activities or initiatives that are being evaluated. It does seem to be the case that the framework/tools and processes associated with the inclusive evaluation approach adopted within the ELAC project have enabled the participants involved in the course development and implementation work to experience the evaluation work in a way that, in the words of one, was 'contextualised to our culture and reality'.

The initial visioning work was considered as a significant component to the experience of feeling that the work was situated, as implied in the following kind of comment;

*"Starting off with personal and institutional beliefs and values is in itself something that we haven't used before, in particular when deciding as a team what we want to evaluate, what is the focus, etc"*

### **Support for collaboration**

The same processes of visioning, along with the other frameworks and processes that constituted the inclusive evaluation approach adopted were felt by some to have had an impact on the way people worked together within the ELAC project and encouraged them to be more collaborative and work more effectively as teams. Commenting that;

*"Evaluation has motivated us to collaborate and cooperate as a team"*

*"Reflecting together as the ELAC team. It kept us constantly together discussing all the procedures and partial results of the evaluation process."*

## **Sustainability**

The RUFDATA framework, in addition to providing a flexible guide for the development and implementation of new courses, also encouraged people to see evaluation as being an important and integral part of any course development that should be integrated from the very beginning. For example, people commented that;

*“Basically I have learnt the importance to establish from the beginning how we are going to evaluate, what topics will be evaluated, the importance of the evaluation”*

*“Before I used to think about evaluation from a positivist perspective, now I apply it from a more constructivist perspective, not only oriented to the students but to a process that starts from the design to the course implementation and the valuing of the results obtained”*

*“The experience of applying a process of continuous evaluation, covering all the stages of the course, has been satisfactory”*

Such aspects of the experience of the evaluation approach had, for some, a stated impact on their own development and knowledge and skills about not only evaluation but, in addition, the development of their knowledge and skills of education and pedagogy and the design of virtual courses. Which is, possibly, the most significant outcome mentioned?

*“This has been a very enriching process because personally it has shown me clearly the development of my knowledge and skills, particularly in the pedagogic aspects of virtual course design”*

*“The most significant change for me has been to see the education process as something that is constructed among the participants involved”*

*“The new ways of doing self evaluation, evaluation of the teachers and the evaluation of the different stages have changed my perspective of the meaning of evaluation. Now it allows me to plan and improve my teaching practice as much as the learning of the students”*

## **Final Reflections**

It is interesting to reflect on the lessons learnt and nature of the experience and outcomes described by the participants in the ELAC project. It has to be acknowledged, that none of the above outcomes and comments actually says anything about whether or not the courses implemented within the ELAC project have been ‘successful’. It is not that the inclusive approach adopted within ELAC does not consider this to be an unimportant question for the evaluation to address. In deed it is an important question and it is being addressed by each of the situated ELAC teams within the context of their work. Is it, however, the most important question for a project of this kind? The more instantly recognizable results and outcomes of evaluation that is associated with an ‘accountable’ imperative for evaluation and with end of project evaluations could be claimed to be of lesser significance in terms of the overall success and learning associated with the project? The kind of outcomes and processes just described that are associated with the inclusive evaluation approach adopted within the ELAC project, arguably, are of greater significance and will have a more long lasting impact than those associated with measuring or describing the results of the implementation of specific courses. Related to this and of equal interest is the importance of addressing and engaging with the ultimate imperative of ELAC. Which is, in what ways has the project effected the lives and approaches to environmental management and planning of those who are its intended constituent target group of the ELAC courses and initiatives i.e. students and academics in higher education within the area of environmental management and planning in the participating Latin American countries. This will be a key area to consider in the latter part of the project and in the final stages of any evaluation based on an inclusive evaluation approach. Ultimately we need to assess the extent the ELAC project and others like it constitutes a useful ‘change’ strategy.

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