EMPOWERMENT AND ETHNOGRAPHIC EVALUATION: HEWLETT-PACKARD'S $15 MILLION DIGITAL DIVIDE PROJECT (A CASE EXAMPLE)

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The roots of empowerment evaluation are in action anthropology. Ethnographic evaluators help people learn how to evaluate their own programs to build capacity and improve their programs and lives. This project involves a $15 million project funded by Hewlett-Packard to help 18 American Indian tribes and two African American communities bridge the digital divide. Empowerment evaluation is being used to help them establish their mission, take stock of where they are, and plan for the future. In essence, evaluation is being used to help them chart their own course and improve their lives. Key Words: empowerment, evaluation, technology, ethnographic evaluation

Hewlett-Packard (HP) conducted a $15 million philanthropic venture to bridge the digital divide. HP's former CEO, Carly Fiorina, made the pledge and it is funded through their Philanthropy and Education Program. Dr. David Fetterman, Stanford University, facilitated the ethnographic and empowerment evaluation of the Digital Village project. The Digital Village was conducted in three communities in the United States. The East Coast–based Digital Village involves a collaboration of primarily African American community-based organizations, ranging from Blacks in Wax (a wax museum) to Kids Scoop (a local newspaper created by and for kids). The West Coast–based project is composed of 18 American Indian tribes. The third is in northern California and is primarily a Latino and African American community composed of groups ranging from Plugged In (high-tech community resources center) to Opportunities Industrialization Center (employment training program). Videos of each of the community activities, as well as similar empowerment evaluation projects, are available on the web at http://homepage.mac.com/profdavidf.[1]

THE PROBLEM: DIGITAL DIVIDE

The aim of Hewlett-Packard's community-based Digital Villages is to leapfrog across the digital divide.[2] These are communities that have been left behind in the digital age

(U.S. Department of Commerce 1999). They are also communities that have been systematically disenfranchised in terms of economics and information. Hewlett-Packard has supplied funds, equipment, and consultants to assist each community. However, they have left in the communities' hands the effort to address their most pressing social and economic concerns.

THE APPROACH: EMPOWERMENT AND ETHNOGRAPHIC EVALUATION

These communities are using empowerment (Fetterman 2001; Fetterman and Wandersman 2004) and ethnographic evaluation (Fetterman 1984; Fetterman and Pitman 1986) to plan, implement, assess, and improve and refine their efforts. These approaches differ from many other forms of evaluation and strategic planning because the communities of evaluation practice remain in control of the process.[3] Empowerment evaluation is the use of evaluation concepts and techniques to foster self-determination and program improvement (see Fetterman 2001; Fetterman, Kaftarian, and Wandersman 1996; Fetterman and Wandersman 2004). Its roots are in action anthropology (Tax, 1958) and community psychology (Rappaport, 1987). Action anthropology enlists the anthropologist as well as the community member in research-related activities that have a direct impact on community life. Empowerment evaluation, following this model, requires the community, anthropologist/evaluator, and funder. The aim is to help people help themselves. Empowerment evaluation builds on the action anthropology tradition by engaging both the ethnographic and empowerment evaluator and community member in projects that are directly relevant to community concerns. Empowerment evaluation differs from traditional evaluation in many ways: (1) the community is in control rather than the funder or external evaluator; (2) the evaluator serves as coach or critical friend, rather than as a disinterested third party or external expert; (3) the evaluation is designed to help people improve their programs and their lives, rather than as a "neutral experiment or test" or an exclusive focus on compliance; (4) it fosters self-reliance and self-determination rather than dependency; and (5) the ethnographic/empowerment evaluator typically maintains a relationship, albeit modified, long after the project has ended (including this one where the ethnographer continues to provide advice and disseminate project findings and lessons learned).

The empowerment evaluation approach has three steps: (1) mission; (2) taking stock; and (3) planning for the future. The evaluator/ethnographer serves as a coach or critical friend, helping each community establish its mission or vision. This represents the values of the community as a collaborative. The coach also helps the community take stock or assess where they are in their efforts. This also involves an honest and engaged dialogue about the reasons for their successes and failures. After dialoguing about the status of the community's activities, they create a plan for the future, with specific goals, strategies, and evidence. This process is cyclical in that traditional evaluation and ethnographic methods such as interviews and surveys are used to test whether their strategies are

FIGURE 1 Digital Village Member Taking Stock by Entering Her Ratings on a 1 (Low) to 10 (High) Scale.

FIGURE 2 Digital Village Empowerment Evaluator Muki Hansteen-Izora is Helping to Enter the Data into a Laptop to Facilitate Distribution of the Data.

working and to allow the community to make midcourse corrections as needed based on this evaluative feedback. The community conducts another formal assessment of their activities and compares their assessment with their previous ratings of key activities. In other words, the initial taking-stock exercise represents the community's baseline for future comparison (see Figure 1). The plans for the future represent the intervention, and the second taking-stock exercise is a second data point enabling the community to measure growth or change over time by comparing the baseline ratings with the second data point ratings[4] (see Figure 2).

OUTCOMES: STORIES AND EVIDENCE-BASED ACCOMPLISHMENTS

One of the West Coast Digital Villages, consisting of the 18 American Indian tribes, has numerous stories to tell of how technology has impacted their lives in very positive ways, ranging from helping them assist their children with schoolwork to helping them find a job. In addition, their outcomes are real and evidence-based. For example, they created the largest unlicensed wireless network in the country (as part of their own sovereign nation). The towers, the network traffic, and communications through this system are evidence of their accomplishments. Their efforts were recognized and lauded by the head of the Federal Communications Commission. Training their young people how to main-tain it is another form of evidence and represents building capacity in terms of long-term sustainability. In addition, they secured an E-rate grant, providing $1 million per year from the telephone companies toward building and maintaining the network. They have also created a high-end digital printing press—a small business enterprise representing a contribution to economic sustainability. This Digital Village has also implemented a parent involvement and education center. Their video recording workshops have enabled them to capture their own native history through personal family stories. Technology in this case becomes a powerful means to an end—cultural preservation and development.

The northern California Digital Village created a one-to-one e-Learning program. It provided every teacher and student in grades 4 to 8 with laptop computers. The computers go home with the students, enabling parents to have computer and Internet access as well. They have also launched a small business initiative to help aspiring small businesses in the community. They have a network and a web page that is a "virtual portal" to community services and resources. This Digital Village also supports local employment training programs.

Similarly, the East Coast Digital Village has a residential access program, a small business initiative, and a web portal for the community. In the city's public school system they have distributed laptops to teachers. They have assessed their computer abilities before and after training, documenting growth in most skill areas, ranging from e-mail to surfing the net and teaching on-line to videoconferencing over the net. The outcomes in this project are supported by the evidence of real-world accomplishments.

THE ROLE OF ETHNOGRAPHY

Ethnography has been instrumental in the Digital Villages. The Digital Village community members value an ethnographic orientation because it is respectful. The focus of the work is on their (insider) perspective. Community members are learning to interview each other with traditional ethnographic concepts and tools, including an emic orientation, contextualizing the data, and adopting a nonjudgmental attitude (Fetterman, 1998; Spradley 1979, 1980). The stories are told in their own language and culture. For example, American Indians are interviewing elders, creating digital photo journals and QuickTime videos about their rich cultural history.

Ethnography has also been adapted to evaluation (Fetterman 1984; Fetterman and Pitman 1986). Community members and the ethnographic evaluator are using traditional ethnographic concepts and techniques to assess their initiatives. Instead of an outsider determining what is important and how to assess what is important, the local community remains in charge of the evaluation (with the assistance of a trained ethnographer). As noted earlier, the ethnographic and empowerment evaluator works as a coach or critical friend, rather than as an expert. Evaluators support the community's efforts but ask polite but probing questions about the basis for their assessments. The values associated with an ethnographic orientation permeate the Digital Villages and are reflected in daily behavior, including the funder's demeanor.

THE SPONSOR: HEWLETT-PACKARD'S PHILOSOPHY AND DEMEANOR

The typical role of a sponsor is to make the local group jump through a number of hoops to get the money. Then they disappear, reappearing at the end of the project with a list of expected outcomes. Often the funder is unclear about the goals or expected outcomes at the time of the grant award, only to "surprise" the funded agency or community with very specific, detailed outcomes unrelated to the implemented activities or programs. This is the heavy-handed and out-of-touch sponsor phenomenon.

Hewlett-Packard's engagement in the Digital Village is in stark contrast to this all-too-common model. First of all, the generosity of Hewlett-Packard's award to each of these communities in a time of economic constraint, retrenchment, and cuts is admirable. It is also a matter of thoughtful planning. As Bess Stephen, Hewlett-Packard's Vice President and Worldwide Director for Corporate Philanthropy and Education, explains, "We set aside resources when we are doing extremely well in order to be able to honor our commitments when things are not going as well." However, beyond the award, their dedication to the "learnings" that have emerged from this engagement has been recognized by executive team members as well as by staff members in the local community-based organizations. Hewlett-Packard trusts the local community to chart its own way, with appropriate consultation and assistance. Their adoption of this philosophy was manifested in many ways during the engagement, including allowing one of the local groups to "suggest that HP not participate" in a site visit because the local community team did not feel prepared for the visit. This is a highly unusual degree of understanding and faith in local efforts and control. It is also a measure of HP's commitment to this kind of grassroots, capacity-building philosophy toward giving. HP consultants have been willing to roll up their sleeves to assist along the way. One Digital Village team member captured the demeanor of HP when they explained: "They are respectful and down-to-earth. Even in their business suits, they see the office garbage basket filled and they pick it up and empty it." HP's Janiece Evans-Page captures much of the spirit of the team: "I'm getting paid for what is my passion in life." There were problems to be sure, ranging from equipment delivery delays due to the merger with Compaq to the need for additional management training

at each site. However, the Digital Village members consistently lauded HP for its efforts to help each community solve its local problems as defined by the local community, not the funding agency (see Benioff and Southwick 2004 concerning compassionate capitalism).

REFLEXIVITY: LEARNING FROM MISTAKES AND FROM EACH OTHER

The president of the Carnegie Foundation explained in an Annenberg Lecture that there are no failures in research. The only failure is when a researcher fails to share his or her mistakes or less-than-favorable findings. This results in other researchers wasting their time repeating the same mistakes. We learn from our mistakes and failures. They point to new possibilities in the process and help build an accumulated wealth of knowledge. We all learned a great deal from our mistakes or failures at each site, ranging from communication to sustainability issues. However, these failures or mistakes forced us to reframe the problem, develop new strategies, implement new programs, and plan for the future. The empowerment and ethnographic evaluation approach allowed for data to inform decision making in real time, allowing for midcourse corrections and an honest review of change over time.

There were many examples of reflexivity during the project. One memorable event was when the American Indian Digital Village taught my Ethnographic and Empowerment Evaluation class at Stanford University. We connected the Digital Village to the class through a videoconference over their and our wireless systems. The ability to videoconference over a wireless system was documentation of their success in and of itself—a form of face validity. However, the fact that they were teaching my class about the approach they had adopted to accomplish their goals was another and even more powerful example of their success—adopting and implementing an idea that fostered self-determination and program improvement. In addition, my students were learning from their experience—completing the reflexive circle of learning. This exchange made the evaluation approach that much more credible and compelling for my students. The modeling was excellent (see Figures 3 and 4).

CONCLUSION

In a time of great skepticism and cynicism about business, education, and the future, this project confirms that good faith and hope exist. There is good work being done on both small and large scales. The community-based work is not perfect or seamless or without failures. However, it is a form of radical change and transformation for many engaged as a community of learners and doers. Philanthropy (with a focus on helping people help themselves), an ethnographic orientation (in which the insider's views are paramount), and an empowerment model (in which self-determination

FIGURE 3 Dr. Fetterman Introducing His Stanford University Ethnographic and Empowerment Evaluation Class to The American Indian Digital Village Videoconferencing Session.

FIGURE 4 American Indian Digital Village Videoconferencing with Dr. David Fetterman and His Ethnographic and Empowerment Evaluation Class at Stanford University.

is fundamental) combine to create a synergistic force in our communities to do good—pursuing a social justice agenda. This partnership, as Bess Stephens explains, is "trying to make a difference in the lives of people long after this particular HP initiative has ended." This is what sustainability, empowerment, and capacity building are all about.

NOTES

1. Empowerment evaluations have also been conducted in academically distressed school districts in the Arkansas Delta, antitobacco collaboratives and nonprofits in Arkansas, higher education accreditation studies, a Women's Technology Cluster, Hebrew Union Jewish educators, Potowami Indians, as well as in health care projects in England, Finland, and South African townships.

2. The "digital divide" is the split between those who have computers and Internet access and those who do not have digital access.

3. The "community of evaluation practice" refers to the group in the organization or community actually conducting the self-evaluation, rather than community members in general.

4. See the empowerment web page for details and free guides (http://www.stanford.edu/~davidf/empowermentevaluation.html).

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