

# OUT OF THE FRYING PAN AND INTO THE FIRE: CHALLENGES OF PROGRAM EVALUATION

By *Judy Tso*

Program evaluation is one area of application for applied anthropologists. In recent years, a resurgence of interest in ethnography has led to a greater legitimization of qualitative approaches to analyzing program impact. This has boded well for the field of anthropology. In this article, I trace my internship as a program evaluator from May to November 1999 at a nonprofit literacy agency in Baltimore City. The internship provides a good case study for the joys and challenges of program evaluation and the specific contributions of anthropology to this endeavor.

This evaluation was designed from the onset to utilize qualitative or ethnographic methods to understand the impact of an afterschool program on youth reading achievement (known in evaluation terms as summative or outcome evaluation) and to understand how the program was being implemented and how it could be improved (known as formative or process evaluation).

I evaluated two afterschool reading programs but will focus most of these discussions on the older, more established of the two programs known as the REI, an afterschool reading intervention consisting of three key program components:

- skills reinforcement of reading and writing concepts from the school's daytime reading curriculum;
- enrichment activities including drama, arts and crafts and fieldtrips, etc.;
- an independent reading component known as the 100 Book Challenge where children read independently in the company of volunteer reading coaches.

These programs target at-risk city elementary school children mostly in the first or second grade. The REI

program is in its sixth year of operation. During the 1998/99 school year, the REI program had been in operation at six elementary schools and two of the sites were designated to be evaluated. This afterschool program is implemented in conjunction with the America Reads Initiative that utilizes AmeriCorps national service volunteers who serve for one year as reading instructors.

## Pre-Internship process

Prior to securing this internship, I went through a process of considering what I wished to gain from the internship, what I hoped to accomplish and what theory and methods I sought to use. Before entering the University of Maryland's Master's in Applied Anthropology Program, I had an ongoing interest in corporate organizational effectiveness and sought to pursue this interest through my internship with a nonprofit organization. Program evaluation seemed to be a logical route to impacting program and organizational efficacy.

My immediate objective as described in my internship proposal was methodological: To use ethnographic methods and an anthropological perspective for the purposes of evaluating a community-based program or intervention. Specifically, I wanted to:

- Gain additional experience with ethnographic methods;
- Understand the theory and dynamics of program evaluation;
- And facilitate organizational and program efficacy.

## Internship Process

The first weeks of the internship coincided with the end of the school year. I attended internal meetings, went to the two schools to observe the last



*Judy Tso*

weeks of the program, attended final year awards ceremonies with parents, and interviewed teachers before they left for summer break. During the remainder of the summer I sought to interview the AmeriCorps instructors, staff members and conduct parent focus groups. In addition, I supervised the scoring of a quantitative reading achievement test and collaborated with a statistician to analyze the data, analyzed surveys that were administered to teachers and parents and transcribed half of the text data. I was fortunate to have transcription help to capture the other half of many hours of tape. In the end, I had data from sixteen teacher interviews, two parent focus groups, one AmeriCorps focus group, three more in-depth interviews with AmeriCorps instructors and four in-depth staff interviews. Since I had a desk and computer in the office and was there everyday, this data was supplemented with three months of participant observation in the office, informal office discussions and attendance at meetings.

## Project Successes

My key successes involved finding avenues to apply my findings. In

addition to understanding the impact of the program on participants, my evaluation work also highlighted a number of organizational issues. As a result, I was worried about how my findings would be received internally and how they would be acted upon. I was fortunate that due to serendipity and seeking linkages with ongoing work, the evaluation results were being drawn into a grant writing process that the REI program was undergoing. Safe and Sound, a nonprofit organization created to administer funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, invited afterschool programs across the city of Baltimore to apply for funding to implement national out of school time program standards. As a part of the grant application process, REI was required to present an organizational and program assessment (essentially an evaluation) to determine whether the program was meeting national standards. My ethnographic work addressed many of these assessment categories and I worked with another consultant and the program director to mesh my findings into the Safe and Sound grant process. It was a direct and organic way to apply my findings and I was happy to have a pragmatic way to integrate my results with ongoing work.

REI has recently been awarded the Safe and Sound grant, so I can confidently say my work has had an influence in at least two ways: 1) highlighting and confirming internal issues and 2) integrating findings into a grant process that has resulted in Safe and Sound funding to address these issues.

### Project Challenges

During the internship, I faced a number of challenges including getting the staff's time, managing my boundaries as an outsider, dealing with the fear evaluation provokes and constantly trying to maintain trust with all parties.

#### *Getting Time from Staff*

I came in with hopes of using David Fetterman's approach to evaluation (Fetterman David, S. Kaftarian, and A. Wadnersman. 1996. *Empowerment*

*Evaluation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications) a book recommended by my advisor, Dr. Tony Whitehead. While this book is indeed a good one, implementing the ideas are much harder. Empowerment evaluation in its ideal form, is carried out by staff and participants of the program. This approach empowers staff to do their own evaluation and the evaluator becomes a facilitator. I originally had hoped that staff would be more involved in carrying out the evaluation but, staff members were typically so busy implementing the program and fighting fires, that it was very difficult to engage them in participating in the evaluation process. I felt I was intruding and after a while, I shied away from 'bothering them.' Although they participated willingly in terms of spending time being interviewed, they did not have much time to learn about the methods I was using or for meetings to debrief and immediately act on the ongoing evaluation findings.

In the fall, I generated a number of reports and my challenge was to encourage people to find time to read them. Although in the end the reports were read, I was again reminded that this is a sound bite society and long reports are not well-received even if the information is rich, valuable and lends itself to report format. I found that nonprofits were no different from corporations in their dislike for reading reports.

#### *Losing My Boundary as an Outsider*

As Carol Weiss notes: "[Evaluators] can get so engaged with practitioners and clients and so involved in the processes of the program that they become almost unwitting advocates for it" (Weiss, Carol. 1998. *Evaluation: Methods for Studying Programs and Policies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. p. 38). Because I was working on-site everyday for a period of three months, I began to feel like an employee at some point. This meant I was losing my ability to see as clearly, the newness of the setting was wearing off and I was starting to 'go native.' Like Weiss states, I was identifying so strongly with being a part of the program, that I began

to question whether I could be a successful evaluator. Luckily, by the middle of August, I had the opportunity to leave the setting. Because the NUD\*IST software I purchased was for the Macintosh machine in my home office, that's where I conducted my text analysis. I spent several weeks in isolation coding each interview. By leaving the office environment, I felt I had the distance to return to the role of evaluator. I regained a measure of objectivity that was essential to the data analysis step. At home with my data, the voices were allowed to naturally emerge. I could let the data speak for itself and it was easier for me to operate as a separate entity or outsider.

#### *Dealing with the Fear Evaluation Provokes*

While I felt that I might be too biased in favor of the program, staff and program instructors had an opposite view. Program evaluation brings out the tension between accountability and improvement. As Rutman and Maowbray state: "The accountability perspective on evaluation holds that the worth of the program must be reported and thereby demonstrated..." (Rutman, Leonard and George Moawbray (eds.) 1983 *Understanding Program Evaluation*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage. p. 24). This produces pressure on program staff to demonstrate they have done a good job. A natural fear arises that the evaluator may discover information that makes the program staff look bad or that will threaten program funding. This is particularly true of qualitative evaluation that uncovers more information rather than less. Even though it is rare that one single evaluation will kill a program, people still react defensively to being evaluated.

Although intuitively, one would expect this fear, I was surprised that I had to continually reassure program staff that as an evaluator, I intended to do no harm. While they were focused on accountability, I was focused on improvement. Throughout the evaluation I would reinforce the idea that the purpose of evaluation is not to seek blame but to seek ways to improve the

program for the benefit of all stakeholders. I sought to reiterate my problem solving approach that the search for problems was meant to continue through to the seeking of solutions and positive ways of doing things.

The bottom line is that people don't like to be evaluated. No one likes criticism even if it is meant to be constructive, even if it is in the service of improvement. One suggestion I make to others is that evaluators draft a statement of their intentions at the beginning of the project, what I call a Notice of Intention to Do No Harm (consult American Evaluation Association standards for guidance) and then refer to this statement throughout the project whenever people need to be reminded of your good intentions.

#### *Maintaining Trust with Everyone*

The implication of this fear was that I needed to constantly seek ways to build and maintain trust. Not only did I need to maintain trust with staff, I needed to maintain trust with the national service volunteers who were working as program instructors. These volunteers functioned essentially as employees. Because of certain internal issues, some of the volunteers were nervous about talking to me because they felt that I might represent management and would betray their confidences. I had to reiterate to volunteers that my purpose was to understand the program and its effectiveness and that I had to be as neutral as possible in order to do my job. By having a few honest talks with individuals I was able to convey the difficulty of my position and how I needed to stay out of any internal battles. I was happy to understand their side of the story and to account for it in the evaluation findings, but I would not advocate on anyone's behalf, either management's or the volunteer's.

#### *Communicating the Importance of Qualitative Information*

The final challenge I bring up here is the necessity of continually advocating for the legitimacy of qualitative, ethnographic investigation. Although the executive director of the organiza-

tion understood the value of qualitative evaluation, the program director still focused more interest on the quantitative results. The program director repeatedly sought quantitative evidence of program impact since foundations routinely request such evaluation results. As evaluators, we must convince foundations to request and support all forms of evaluation, not simply quantitative test results which only provide limited information. As I frequently reiterated to staff after the findings were reported, quantitative test results tell us of the presence or absence of program impact and its magnitude. In effect, we get a thumbs up or down but not an explanation of why the program succeeds or fails. A quantitative measurement provides little direction for continued program planning and operations. Qualitative results on the other hand can give us the why explanation, specific information and direction for making decisions and changes in program implementation.

### **Post Internship Process**

The post-internship analysis period has given me a chance to reflect on my role as an anthropologist, how anthropology contributed to my handling the project, and the value of anthropology in general to program evaluation. While the section on program challenges expresses my experiences as the evaluator, this section more directly addresses my experiences as an anthropologist and the contributions of anthropology.

#### *The Usefulness of Stories, Narrative Data Collected through Ethnographic Methods*

The qualitative nature of the methods traditionally used by anthropology, the ethnographic legacy, is an extremely important asset in today's number driven world. The world is enamored by quantitative data but we lack the understanding of programs, of humans, of situations that can best be captured through qualitative methods. Statistical models are too reductionist and do not give us an accurate picture of the

complex dynamics behind a social program's effectiveness or lack thereof. Only through observation, interacting and speaking with the stakeholders can we begin to construct a rich picture of what is actually going on.

#### *A Greater Consciousness of Cultural, Ethnic, Socioeconomic Dynamics*

In formulating an accurate picture, as anthropologists we bring a sensitivity to the issues of culture, ethnicity, class, gender, etc. This sensitivity and consciousness can often be lacking in the wider world, so we bring added value. However, we anthropologists have to be careful not to be over confident. Having an anthropological sensitivity does not assure that we have the interpersonal skills to handle the conflicts arising from an evaluation project. I drew on all my experiences as a facilitator, consultant, and human being to manage the interpersonal issues that arose. As anthropologists, we require more training in interpersonal skills. We also have the opportunity to train others to have an ability to manage diversity and diverse voices.

#### *Valuing All the Voices*

We do owe to postmodernism and to anthropology, a belief that all participants have a useful perspective on a given situation. In the case of this evaluation project, each and every instructor, child, parent, school teacher, staff member, every person who came into contact with the afterschool program was likely to have useful insight to offer. I sought to talk to as many different voices as was feasible in the time period in order to capture their particular insights.

#### *Seeking the Holism of Anthropology*

Holism is routinely offered as a strength of the anthropological approach. Yet I realized it was very difficult to bring this anthropological perspective to bear. In the United States, we rarely design social programs with holism in mind. We do not take into account all of the social structural aspects but instead approach problems from the perspective of the indi-

vidual. The belief is if we address an individual's needs, we will solve the societal problem. In trying to be holistic, I ran up against the cultural wall of U.S. social policy. There is little opportunity to consider the social structural impact on an individual's problems and there is little space programmatically to address these larger issues. We either seek to blame or help the individual but we avoid addressing the larger societal framework that the individual is embedded in. Our challenge as anthropologists then is to continue to seek ways to bring a holistic approach to life. For instance, the evaluation revealed that the program has not achieved the objective of parent involvement in the afterschool program, namely in successfully engaging parents in their child's education and helping

their children to read. To do so requires holistically understanding the family's situation, the community's situation and finally the larger social framework in the United States. The REI program cannot offer a suitable solution to parent involvement without utilizing such a holistic approach and as such this is where the applied anthropologist can make the greatest contribution going forward.

In short, my applied anthropology background was extremely useful in helping me conduct and manage the challenges of evaluation. The knowledge from anthropology, whether it is the legacy of ethnography, a sensitivity to culture and social structure, a reliance on multiple voices or a holistic point of view, is especially applicable and timely in a complex world that demands a heightened understanding of the human

condition. Anthropology is uniquely poised to assist in that understanding.

*Judy Tso is an applied anthropologist, facilitator, personal coach, and Principal of Aha Solutions Unlimited. She completed her Master's in Applied Anthropology in May 2000 from the University of Maryland College Park. Tso has worked with interdisciplinary marketing and new product development teams, facilitating idea generation and conducting qualitative research for corporations. She also works with nonprofit organizations in the areas of program evaluation, strategic planning and diversity training. Her overall mission is personal, program and organizational effectiveness that results in positive social change. She can be reached at <judytso@ahasolutions.org>. ■*