



EBL 101

Research Methods: The Most Significant Change Technique

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In this EBL101 column I am exploring a technique that has largely been used to evaluate international development programs. The Most Significant Change technique (MSC) was developed by Rick Davies and Jessica Dart in the early 2000s to evaluate complex interventions. It takes place during the lifespan of the intervention program, so it is a process of continuous evaluation. While I have not encountered this method used in library and information studies, it strikes me that a technique such as this would be useful in variety of situations: evaluating instruction, appraising public programs, assessing various initiatives in any area of the library (client services, technical services, etc.), and others that I am probably just not seeing right now.

The methodology is participatory, so its use would be a good chance to have direct contact and conversation with various stakeholders. For example, library patrons, library staff, higher administration, the public—whichever is involved with whatever is being looked at and

changed. While this method could perhaps be used on smaller projects in the library, I see its usefulness as being centred more upon large, organization-wide developments and changes, as a way to continuously monitor the situation and make adjustments as the project progresses. Examples of larger projects include the implementation of a different organizational structure, the design, development, and building of a library facility, advancement initiatives, or a large-scale research project that is national in scope.

Dart and Davies (2003) refer to MSC as a “dialogical, story-based evaluation tool” that eschews “conventional monitoring against quantitative indicators” in favour of the “collection and participatory interpretations of ‘stories’ about change” (p. 138). These stories are “examples of significant program outcomes are collected and presented to designated groups of stakeholders who deliberate on the value of these outcomes in a systematic and transparent manner” (Dart,

2005, p. 261). Though stories are the focus of the analysis, Dart and Davies (2003) indicate that “the central aspect of the technique is not the stories themselves, but the deliberation and dialogue that surrounds the process of selecting significant changes” (p. 138).

On his news website, Davies (2008) states that MSC is most useful in the following situations:

- Where it is not possible to predict in any detail or with any certainty what the outcome will be
- Where outcomes will vary widely across beneficiaries
- Where there may not yet be agreements between stakeholders on what outcomes are the most important
- Where interventions are expected to be highly participatory, including any forms of monitoring and evaluation of the results

MSC consists of seven key steps (although the guideline document listed below under resources by the same authors outlines 10 steps):

1. *The selection of domains of change to be monitored*
Unlike performance indicators, which are specific and focused, the domains of change are broad and loose, allowing for program participants to define them for themselves. The domains are identified by stakeholders.
2. *The reporting period*
“Stories of significant change are collected from those most directly involved” over a time period decided upon at the start of the project. The time period can be extended if more stories are needed.
3. *The participants*
The participants are those who are involved with the program in question, such as beneficiaries, clients, and field staff.
4. *Phrasing the question*
Stories are gathered by using one simple question: “During the last

month, in your opinion, what was the most significant change that took place in the program?”

5. *The structure of participants*
The stories are then analyzed and “filtered up through the levels of authority typically found within an organization or program”, with each level selecting the most significant change stories to be sent on up the ladder.
6. *Feedback*
Continuous communication amongst stakeholders participating in and reviewing the stories is a key component, so that the feedback can be incorporated into each subsequent round of story collection.
7. *Verification*
Verification can take place by visiting the sites of the events described in the stories for follow up. (Adapted from Dart & Davies, 2003, pp. 138-139)

For example, the above steps might be mapped on to a library or information management process in the following way when a complex intervention is chosen for continuous evaluation, e.g., the move to a programmatic approach to academic library instruction. Domains to be monitored are selected by participants in this change process, and by those who the change affects, such as librarians, students, library staff, and others from the larger institution (professors from various colleges who utilize library instruction, administrators from colleges who are participating in the construction of a programmatic approach to instruction, etc.). Stories are gathered from the participants regularly over the academic year to provide continuous monitoring of the change intervention. Stories are the result of asking a simple question, such as “what was the most significant change that happened this month as a result of the programmatic approach to instruction recently implemented?” Those monitoring the change analyse and examine the stories at every level, with the different analyses going up the organizational structure to be further analysed. All participants provide and share continuous feedback, providing

more information about the change occurring. Follow up should happen, with various participants talking to other participants about the change taking place, verifying the analyses of the stories.

The MSC technique could be an interesting framework with which to assess and evaluate our professional practice. Dart and Davies (2003) state that the key strength of MSC “lies in its ability to facilitate a dynamic dialogue between designated stakeholders” (p. 152). As librarians and information professionals, we should be looking for new and innovative ways to communicate with our users, clients, patrons, and with each other as we strive to provide the best services possible.

Other resources and examples of MSC in action

Davies, R., & Dart, J. (2005). *The ‘Most Significant Change’ (MSC) technique: A guide to its use*. Retrieved from <http://www.alnap.org/resource/8102>

Lunch, C. (2007). The Most Significant Change: Using participatory video for monitoring and evaluation. *Participatory Learning and Action*, 56, 28-32. <http://www.iied.org/participatory-learning-action>

Wilder, L., & Walpole, M. (2008). Measuring social impacts in conservation: experience of using the Most Significant Change method. *Oryx*, 42(4), 529-538. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0030605307000671>

Willetts, J., & Crawford, P. (2007). The most significant lessons about the Most Significant Change technique. *Development in Practice*, 17(3), 367-379. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09614520701336907>

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