

Tangible Tools for Participatory Evaluation: Deepening Creative Engagement Through Hands-On Materials

Sarah Kuhn & Sharon M. Wasco, October 2013

Relevance Statement: Bringing the perspectives of multiple stakeholders into evaluation decision-making is one of the central tenets of participatory evaluation. We believe the ability to facilitate embodied thinking is an important skill that evaluators can use to not only encourage creativity, but support full participation of stakeholders in all aspects of program evaluation including describing the program, gathering credible evidence, justifying conclusions, and ensuring use and sharing lessons learned. We believe thinking with things can remove barriers to participation and collaboration among diverse stakeholders. We hope this workshop will equip and inspire participants to move beyond common practice—where for instance one facilitator sits at the keyboard or stands at the whiteboard—to try something innovative such as offering a set of malleable items to a group of evaluation stakeholders to build their program's logic model.

Our own practice provides support that intentional use of hands and bodies helps people think about complex issues and abstract ideas. Workshop facilitator and community psychologist Sharon Wasco has used Play-doh, Lego, pipe-cleaners and beads in several different evaluation projects to facilitate clients' embodied thinking towards reframing the challenges faced by interdisciplinary sexual assault response teams, formulating goals for an action research project, understanding the multidimensional nature of community readiness assessment, and determining what makes an effective curriculum-based prevention activity. She is innovating with these techniques to also engage stakeholders in, and thus improve, data analysis, data visualization and evaluation use. Using familiar objects can increase stakeholders' comfort with evaluation procedures, which have the potential to cause tension and anxiety. One of the advantages of incorporating thinking with things into evaluation procedures is that tactile objects and repetitive hand movements reduce stress (think worry beads or rosaries). Workshop facilitator Sarah Kuhn, who is a certified Lego Serious Play facilitator, has pilot study findings that female students who watched a math lecture, then took a short math test, reported less math anxiety when they held a crocheted hyperbolic plane (a soft, 3-D representation of a non-Euclidean geometry concept made of yarn) in their hands.

Evaluation 2013's presidential strand theme, *Evaluation Practice in the Early 21st Century*, asks us to think about the "big tent" of evaluation. Our own inspiration for integrating thinking with things into program evaluation practice has come from many disciplines including the field of software design where Tangible User Interfaces (TUIs) have been found to best leverage human skills and abilities—dexterity, gestural communication, embodied thinking, and collaboration—and reduce cognitive load. A certainty of the 21st Century is that varied sectors of society, including the field of program evaluation, will continue to churn out complicated datasets, conceptual models, and sophisticated (even, perhaps, hands-free) information-delivering technology. In future workplaces filled with ever more concepts and data, program stakeholders will likely continue to find comfort and value in using simple, ordinary objects to "get their hands on" ideas and "get their heads around" actions suggested by those ideas.

..please join us at our **Birds of a Feather** lunchtime session on Saturday, October 19th

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Websites:

- <http://www.seriousplay.com>
to learn about Lego Serious Play
- <http://makerfaire.com>
to learn more about the Maker Movement
- <http://www.gogamestorm.com>
to learn more about Gamestorming

Books:

- Damasio, A. (1999). *The feeling of what happens: Body and emotion in the making of consciousness*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt.
- McGonigal, J. (2011). *Reality is broken: Why games make us better and how they can change the world*. New York: Penguin.
- Michalko, M. (2006). *Thinkertoys: A handbook of creative-thinking techniques*. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press.
- Wilson, F. (1998). *The hand: How its use shapes the brain, language, and human culture*. New York: Vintage Books.

Like Minds:

- Ellen Taylor Powell, Ellen Henert, Joan Cybela & Mary Crave training curricula on evaluation capacity building
- Lyn Paleo & Denece Dodson on adhesive formats for evaluation data collection
- Johanna Morariu & Ann Emery on making data display accessible

Design Principles for Tools to Support Creative Thinking:

- Support Exploration
- Low Threshold, High Ceiling, Wide Walls
- Support Many Paths and Many Styles
- Support Collaboration
- Support Open Interchange
- Make It As Simple As Possible—And Maybe Even Simpler
- Choose Black Boxes Carefully
- Invent Things That You Would Want To Use Yourself
- Balance User Suggestions With Observation and Participatory Processes
- Iterate, Iterate—Then Iterate Again
- Design for Designers
- Evaluation of Tools

Resnick et al. (2005). Institute for Software Research. Paper 816. <http://repository.cmu.edu/isr/816>

