

## ISSUES AT STAKE AND REQUIREMENTS OF A QUALITY IMPROVEMENT OF EXPERT EVALUATION

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### INTRODUCTION

In certain contexts, it is not possible to use the evidence of efficiency to evaluate the quality of a program or material for the promotion of health.

Thus, for example :

- the decision whether to subsidize a project is generally taken on the basis of a written document (before the implementation of the program);
- the promotion of educational material (for example, by presenting it in a catalogue or on a website) cannot be based on a rigorous experimentation of this educational material in different contexts of use.

One can then resort to expert evaluation to assess the quality of the projects or materials in question.

### WHAT IS EXPERT EVALUATION ?

It is a value judgement passed by competent people on the quality of some material or action program.

More specifically,

- The value judgement means to judge the efficiency and usefulness of a program.
- Competent people are professionals working in the sector of health promotion, such as organizers, doctors, educational psychologists, dieticians, nurses, producers of health education videocassettes.
- The material can be a video, a game, a pedagogical “package”, a theatre play.
- The action programs are projects that promote health for 11/12-year-old children, for people who live in underprivileged precincts, for the prevention of cot deaths, for the development of a local policy of health promotion.

### THE THEORETICAL MODEL

These practices of expert evaluation can be analysed in the light of the theoretical model of Demarteau (1998). He advocates that there are three components in any evaluation act.

- **The process** (by which one delimits, one obtains, one provides useful information).
- **The judgement** (based on reference values such as efficiency, usefulness, feasibility, performance, appropriateness).
- **The decision** (on the future of the program or the promotion of the material...).

Demarteau's model also anticipates different ways of applying these components :

- √ These three components are either explicit (expressed)/or implicit (hidden).
- √ The collection of information (process), the judgement on results, decisions can be achieved by internal or external people (the promoter of a program, the producer of a material).
- √ Each of these components can be formalized (presence of indicators, methods, criteria) or remain informal.

In expert evaluation, as it is usually defined, the process and judgement components are assigned to external bodies (that are neither promoters of the program, nor producers of the material) and the only demand is that these experts explicitly formulate a judgement on the program or the material.

The decision is not the doing of experts, but, depending on the case, of the budgetary authority of the people who are responsible for the publishing of catalogues and websites or of users who wish to select a material.

Since 1984, the team of the APES-ULG (Community Wallonie Brussels) has been working towards the improvement of the devices of expert evaluation, in particular by developing methods and materials that strengthen the clarification and the formalization of the following three components : process, judgement, decision.

#### Ways of clarifying the process and judgement components

The process is explicit since there is identification of the information used by experts to pass their judgement and the installation procedure to produce the judgement.

The judgement is explicit since a report is written and argued by experts.

Formalizing the process and judgement components has been at the centre of the scientific and methodological support provided by the APES-ULG to these two devices of expert evaluation.

**formalizing the judgement component** : criteria have been defined and formalized in analysis grids to judge the quality

- \* of a program, namely its priority, coherence, pertinence, usefulness, credibility;
- \* of an educational support: accuracy and pertinence of the content, interactivity, attractiveness.

**formalizing the process component** : the sequence of elaboration of expertise judgement is formally planned

- \* presentation of the program according to a standardized model, perusal by two experts who have to write a report, discussion by a counsel commission, writing of an expertise report based on consensus;
- \* the ways experts explore the material, individual use of the analysis grids, collective writing of a report based on a synthesis form by confronting different analyses.

Thus, the progressive adjustments of these two devices of expert evaluation that exist in the Community Wallonie - Brussels allow us to assert that analysis grids and the collective writing of expert judgement are two requirements that increase the quality of the produced expertise.

A third quality requirement has been particularly underlined by the expertise of material, namely to train experts to put into practice the standardized analysis process and to produce reports.

Furthermore, the committees of experts who were confronted with the evaluation of programs with a view to subsidization have highlighted a series of issues connected with the implementation of these processes and formalizing materials of an expertise.

We wish to set out in more detail these requirements of quality improvement as well as the issues that are at stake

## **REQUIREMENTS OF QUALITY IMPROVEMENT**

### *1. One of the quality requirements is indeed the use of analysis grids formalizing the judgement criteria*

The benefit of the use of such grids is threefold :

- they encourage the capacity of distancing oneself. It has to do with the capacity to go beyond one's first impressions. The grid thus increases the objectivity of judgements focused on documents (program, health promotion material).
- they guide and enrich the analysis of documents. The grids make it possible to widen the field of the criteria that are spontaneously used by each person according to their experience – They provide an interface that encourages communication between experts. This makes it possible to refer to a common language, to an identical structure, thus facilitating the collective writing of a report.

### *2. A second requirement is therefore the handing in of a collective report*

The two expertise devices that were tried out in the Community Wallonie Brussels rest on the forming of multidisciplinary groups of experts.

These groups gather competent professionals in terms of content, psycho - pedagogical processes or developed strategies, use of material or actions of the same type in the field.

The collective writing of a report makes a confrontation of individual analyses necessary. This passage from the collection of individual opinions to one collective opinion.

- induces each expert to have a critical look and to distance themselves from their judgement. This process of creating a distance allows them to fine-tune their report;
- creates the field of “intersubjectivity”. This confrontation of different opinions renders a consensus or an integration of the diversity of viewpoints possible.

### 3. A third quality requirement lies in the training of experts

This third requirement maximizes the first two. In order for the experts to be able to use the analysis materials that are proposed and adopt this collective report writing process, it is fundamental that they make the analysis grids their own and that they practice using them, that they learn to communicate on the basis of these grids and that they achieve a synthetic report that reflects their debates. This is why, in the framework of the trainings proposed by the APES-ULG in the Community Wallonie Brussels, experts have the opportunity to give their opinion on the analysis materials, to formulate remarks.

Proposals of modification, which are the result of a consensus reached between experts and respect the methodological qualities of analysis materials are taken into account and lead to repeated adaptations of these analysis materials.

## **THE ISSUES AT STAKE THAT ARE RAISED BY THE EXPERTS**

The implementation of these requirements raises issues identified by the different experts who have been trained in expert evaluation and now work in the framework of the different committees that have been created.

### **A first issue is to reflect possibly divergent - perhaps even contradictory - opinions, in a synthesis of appreciation**

The analysis materials and the processes implemented strengthen the homogeneity between experts, they build a consensus. by opening a space for “intersubjectivity”; the collective report is an obstacle to the use of the analysis grid to control, to rationalize a pre-established opinion.

While doing this, it is important to make sure that the specific view angles of some experts can be expressed. This is why it is so important

- to keep an individual approach so as to get to know the material or the project and do a first analysis of this material,
- to have moments of appropriation during the training sessions.

### **A second issue is to diversify the criteria that serve as reference to judgements passed that cannot account extensively for the wealth of the material or programs submitted to the analysis.**

Experts think that the analysis grids with their lists of criteria are interesting and complete; the grids have the advantage of effectively outdistancing first impressions; but experts also think that these materials are “compromises” - that is to say that they comprise a reasonable number of items that make a realistic use possible. The difficulty that experts then have, is that these materials cannot reflect, exhaust the reality of the programs and the wealth of the pedagogical material analysed. They lack exhaustiveness.

**A third issue is to allow the separation between the technical report on the project or the material and the decision taken.**

In the framework of expert evaluation of projects with a view to subsidization, experts write a motivated report, based on a technical appreciation of the project's coherence, pertinence, feasibility, etc. This report is sent to the political decision-makers to help them with their decision. It is not the experts who have the power to decide whether the project is subsidized or not. The decision rests solely in the hands of the political decision-maker who can decide that other criteria than the experts' report should intervene (their personal appreciation of the project, institutional or political criteria).

Likewise, in the case of the recourse to expert evaluation to analyse the quality of a given material (video, game, pedagogical package, brochure, theatre play), the decision to insert a title in a catalogue or on a website does not belong to the experts but to the people who are responsible for the collection of the material in question, who will then lean on the experts' report. Obviously, it is not the expert either who decides whether to use a document that has been recommended. In these two cases also, other criteria than the experts' report will intervene in the decision of insertion and use.

**A last issue is linked to the will to use the materials and productions of the expertise to improve the quality of practice of the program promoters and material creators, on the one hand, and decision-makers and users of those materials, on the other.**

Decision-makers may communicate the motivated, technical report of expert committees to producers of material or promoters of programs. The expected benefit is an improvement of these actors' quality of practice. However, one observes that the appropriation of these recommendations by producers and promoters of projects causes problems: the results of expert evaluation remain external, just as the process of evaluation was.

Indeed, promoters, producers, decision-makers and users do not intervene at any moment in the definition of the criteria of judgement in the current devices. Furthermore, promoters of programs participate in the first stage of the process of evaluation by agreeing to write the project according to a plan (a writing model) that facilitates the use of criteria of judgement by experts. The creators of material, on the other hand, are not asked to make a standardized presentation of their products for the committee of experts.

## CONCLUSION

I would like to conclude with this last point. As I have tried to establish, this process of expert evaluation is really concerned about making decisions on the part of the decision-makers transparent; it is also an attempt at implementation of a fair judgement system that is free from subjectivity and influence. The hope was also that this system would lead to an improvement of the quality of the productions, projects and decisions.

In the two examples of expert evaluation that we have presented, neither the political decision-makers, the experts who collect materials, nor the promoters and producers are involved in the development of analysis materials or in the definition of the type of information that will serve as the basis for the judgement.

Furthermore, in these devices of evaluation, the material producer or the promoter of programs only have, at their disposal, for the time being, the written projects and the materials that have been created. Other channels of information could probably usefully complement this only source of information on which is based today's judgement of experts appointed by the decision-makers and the collector of materials.

At the current stage, the new challenge that we, experts (inventors of the process and analysis grids), have to take up is to think critically about this relative absence of the producer and the decision-maker in the creation of this process of expert evaluation.

In the studies on the use of evaluation that illustrate the necessary requirements in order for the results of an evaluation to be used in a process of decision, there can be found, among these requirements, the number of contacts between the appraiser and the user as well as the proximity between the results of the evaluation and the other elements that intervene in the decision.

Therefore a new partnership between the different protagonists must be devised to enable producers and decision-makers to make the reports made their own. It is one of the sine qua non requirements to raise the level of productions.

Indeed the challenge will be to maintain the external character of expert evaluation while allowing for its results to be taken into account by decision-makers and users, program promoters and producers of materials.

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