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Contexts, assessment paradigms and ecological evaluation

Nathalie Younès, 17 jan. 2024, AEA Europe

The definition of assessment cultures that you have proposed resonates with my work on evaluation paradigms and their evolution. This resonates with my work because this definition considers both contextual and personal factors. It also emphasises the fact that the evaluation cultures are plural.

In reference to Kuhn's work, (1962 The Structure of Scientific Revolutions) paradigm has 2 meanings:

- 1 A Standard model for dealing with problem (original proposal)
- 2 A broader definition disciplinary framework that is to say the body of values, data, methods and ways of seeing the world shared by a community of researchers.

= very similar as you understand culture

The title of my presentation is

- Context : when you talk about cultures it means that you consider the context, not always the case,
- Begin with a brief overview on assessment paradigms through time -
- But what I would like to discuss with you is the paradigm of ecological evaluation. This is a theoretical and methodological proposal I've built for my HDR in 2020 (twenty twenty). France Habilitation to direct research. Supervise PhD students Then we will have 20 minutes of discussion I would like to get your view about how this presentation resonates with your work

This proposal is anchored in my research path, successively : 1/ a PHD on student evaluation of teaching in 2006, a requirement linked to the Bologna process and the quality of HE. in France This has disrupted the culture of university teaching, individualistic and without training. I've been working on the conditions for formative effects of this kind of evaluation which, 20 years after it was introduced by law, is still not widely used as a formative assessment tool. 2/ A research work on assessment practices : AFL in primary school, secondary and also HE. The AFL culture is difficult to reconcile with a culture of normative evaluation based on competition and ranking. Collaborative research aims to develop this culture of AFL.

3/ evaluation of the policy of pedagogical training for higher education teachers

4 / hybridisation in HE.

Today I won't talk about the specific results of those research but rather an epistemological contribution to be discussed here in the group

1/ A brief recap of the three main paradigms of evaluative research

This is not new but it is important to situate ourselves in these paradigmatic universes.

– The quantitative paradigm

Relies on measurements, performance indicators, standardised measures for testing (e.g. PISA Programme for International Student Assessment or national assessments ; or randomised control trials.

Relies on aggregated data: individuals, schools, local authorities, country

The use of quantitative methods has faced several criticism over time For instance : Robinson, (1950) spoke about ecological illusion. By this term he meant that people give to the one individual the characteristics of their group) ; take into account different levels of context (Statistical multi-level models).

The reason why I begin with the quantitative paradigm is because at the moment this paradigm is dominant. This is the case for almost every countries. For instance in the UK we can see that The guidance issued by the government on evaluation focuses on quantitative methods. For instance in the magenta book it starts with the theory of change, then it goes on to talk of the experimental and quasi experimental methods. This explains why I talk about paradigm and not only quantitative methods because of this dominance.

– The qualitative paradigm

Emerged in reaction : Guba and Lincoln 1989 : the fourth generation evaluation (constructivism)

- Contextualisation, regulation, process
- Experiencing, living, meaning
- A profusion of methods
- What kind of generalisation?

– The participative paradigm

In the context of classroom assessment this has been translated in practices of self-assessment, peer-assessment for exemples.

- shared construction of meaning and decisions

- multiple forms
- more or less cooperative
- more or less practical or transformative

Toward the end of the 1990s, Cousins and Whytmore (1998) highlighted the rise of participative tests but also distinguished between two major approaches to participative testing, based on specific epistemological and cultural founding principles. According to a practical participatory evaluation from North-America, the goal is to promote the use of evaluation within the decision-making process. The basic postulate of this approach – according to which the stakeholders’ participation strengthens relevance, appropriation and thus use – has since been supported by various research works, highlighting conditions more or less favourable to such developments. The second approach, more radical, called the “participatory transformative approach”, is inscribed within a type of epistemology inspired from South-America, in reference to Freire and the concepts of emancipation and conscientization. Evaluation is perceived as a developmental process aiming at transforming power relations, action and social change by involving the dominated stakeholders within the survey, reflection, negotiation, decision-making process, creation of knowledge and empowerment.

But **despite** the fact that those research **aimed at being emancipatory** for the people, those methods **faced** many constraints and are difficult to implement.

2 / An ecosystemic paradigm

We explored the proposal of an ecological evaluation in a ecosystemic paradigm that requires to work at different levels of analysis and interrelations. After the ecological evaluation, the goal is to hold together the different paradigms of evaluation practices which in fact coexist. Rather than situating these paradigms as a succession of generations where one would substitute itself to the other, it is indeed their connections that are in play in an ecosystemic approach, in terms of resonance between environments and methods.

This brings us to the ecosystemic paradigm that underpins my proposal for an ecological evaluation.

One of the key point of an ecological evaluation is that it is part of an individual and collective emancipating and empowering perspective. Ecological evaluation aims to offer room for maneuver and for meaning at the same time though methodological procedures and situated forms of participation.. If the participatory demand is now strong within public policies projects, due to an intensification of collaborative methods that can also be found in research and teaching practices, there is still a lot more to do, in every evaluation, to seriously consider translocal orientations and the specificity of each local situation.

Such a perspective leads to question the complexity and specificity of systems, sharing and commitment at stake, given the necessity to take into account experiences located at the same time within specific environments and also within institutional and personal trajectories. This requires to work at different levels of analysis and interrelations (Fig.1).

Ecological evaluation : synergies between contexts



Figure 1 : synergies between contexts

That's what I've tried to represent on this slide. The interrelations between translocal guidelines, policies, paradigms, disciplines, references sytems, technologies but also the local situations and the people involved with their practices, experiences, meaning, dialogue and the emancipatory process at stake.

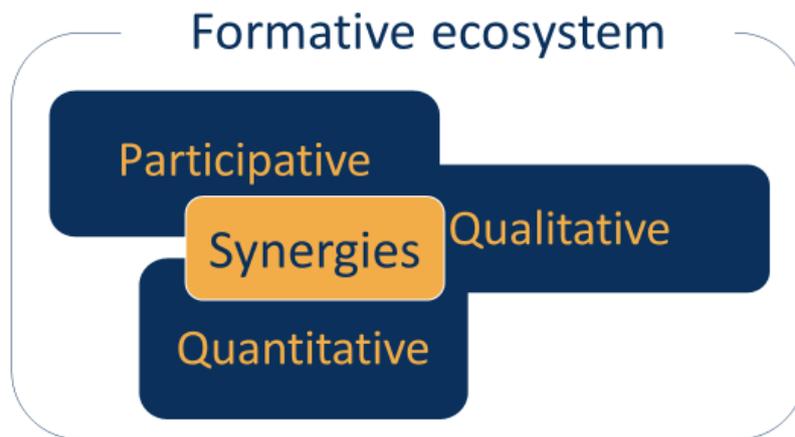


Figure 2 : synergies between paradigms

After the ecological evaluation, the goal is to hold together the different paradigms of evaluation practices already mentioned and which in fact coexist (Fig.2). Rather than situating these paradigms as a succession of generations where one would substitute itself to the other, it is indeed their connections that are in play in an ecosystemic approach, in terms of resonance between environments and methods.

Empowerment, through the prism of ecological evaluation, leads to reconsider the environments involved as synergic ecosystem that included different levels to develop together while considering emerging divergences and convergences. We cannot maintain the illusory idea of sharing and consensus as obvious or, as Charles Hadji (1997) underlined it, the utopia of formative evaluation within a culture of competition and grading. By creating a synergy between the different evaluation paradigms, ecological evaluation participates to an adaptative formative ecosystem.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to emphasise the challenge represented by such an evaluation, which runs counter to mainstream thinking. Creating synergies between methods, between

stakeholders and between researchers from different paradigms is very difficult. It requires a collaborative ethos.

Another condition is to build situated psycho-socio-technical synergic mediations.

In an ecosystemic evaluation that is seen as a meeting between environments and individuals, the dynamics of transformation, coevolution and adaptation are often activated. An entire formative ecosystem is involved in order to recognize, integrate the stakeholders' perspectives and activate dialogic synergies along the process of evaluation. (It may be a matter of collaborative research or participative intervention research, (today we have a significant corpus of results demonstrating the power of collective and individual elaborations).

Elaborating the way of such an ecological evaluation means triggering an integrating meeting articulated around the very meaning of the evaluation and its protocols. If political and institutional dimensions of this type of evaluation are determining components, the part devoted to the experience of each individual or each evaluated ecosystem is also essential to emancipatory dynamics.

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