



AES Virtual Discussion:

Evaluating in the COVID-19 world

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AES Virtual Discussion: Evaluating in a COVID-19 World

WESTIR Limited attended two virtual discussions hosted by the [Australian Evaluation Society](#) (AES) in April 2020. The discussions, hosted by AES Regional Network Committees in NSW and Western Australia, were aimed at helping evaluators adjust to working and evaluating in the COVID-19 context.

Virtual presentation from Western Australia – 24 April 2020

A presentation by Nolan Stephenson (WA Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development) provided a useful overview of how the COVID-19 situation is affecting our work. He reflected that many evaluators at this time are asking many questions including:

- Is the evaluation worth doing and what evidence is available?
- How have the needs and intended outcomes changed for the evaluator, the decision makers and those being evaluated?
- What methods of data collection are no longer viable in the COVID-19 environment?
- What new opportunities have arisen as a result of the new approaches that have been thrust upon us?

There were some reflections shared on how evaluators could adapt to the new situation moving forward. This includes:

- Undertake fewer data collection exercises that are more in-depth in nature.
- Focus on the critical pathways and outcomes and consider new scenarios.
- Start thinking about how programs can be made more flexible to deal with rapidly evolving circumstances.
- Remembering that while we need to build our own capacity, there is also a need to build the capacity of the communities we are working with.

Virtual discussion from NSW – 30 April 2020

The NSW session was hosted by Jade Maloney (ARTD Consultants) and Keren Winterford (UTS Institute of Sustainable Futures). The aim of the session was to share the lived experience of evaluators as a community of practice and reflect on how we can best undertake evaluation during this period.

Jade Maloney provided a short presentation called 'Evaluating in a pandemic'. Some of the key insights shared included:

- **How evaluation and evaluative thinking can help now:** The pandemic has forced us all to become developmental evaluators at this time and support real-time sense

making. There is a need to address immediate needs while also keeping an eye on the long game.

- **How we can adapt existing evaluations:** Asking key questions such as:
 - Can the evaluation still be useful now?
 - How can you adapt or add to your evaluation questions to make it useful?
Can you record and assess your adaptations and identify what adjustments need to continue post COVID-19?
 - Can you adapt your methods to work with restrictions?
 - In long term evaluations, can you maintain some consistent data collection?
- **Deciding whether to press ahead:** The World Bank Group has created a useful [word tree](#) to help you determine whether you should continue with your evaluation.
- **Recognising and facilitating change:** The need to expect, facilitate and embrace change at this time. Evaluation designs, data collection, reporting timelines and criteria will and should change.
- **Managing adaptively:** There are a number of tasks that evaluators will need to do to adapt to the current environment, including:
 - Understanding the effect on key stakeholders and rethinking engagement strategies.
 - Understanding the new decisions that need to be made and who has the authority to make them.
 - Determining whether new approaches will have budgetary changes or could cause harm.
 - Consider equity and accessibility when adapting new data collection methods, and be purposeful in what you are choosing,

Keren Winterford also provided a short presentation called 'Technologies for evaluation online: Evaluation in a COVID-19 world'. Some of the key points included:

- The SAMR model (Substitution, Augmentation, Modification, Redefinition) offers a method of seeing how computer technology might impact teaching and learning,
 - Substitution: Computer technology is used to perform the same task that was done before the use of computers.
 - Augmentation: Computer technology offers an effective tool to perform common tasks.
 - Modification: This is the first step over the line between enhancing the traditional goings-on of the classroom and transforming the classroom. Common tasks are being accomplished through the use of computer technology.

- Redefinition: Computer technology allows for new tasks that were previously inconceivable.
- A range of technologies that can be used for engagement was shared (See Table 1 below). Keren stressed that we need to be clear about our purpose for using the technology, so we get the best out of it:

Table 1: Using technologies for increased engagement

| For engagement / collaboration | Mind mapping, brain storming, white boarding | Surveys and polls |
|---|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Zoom ● Zoom webinar ● MS Teams ● Skype ● Slack ● Google Meet | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Miro ● Synthetron ● MindMeister ● Mural ● Stormboard ● Lucid Charts ● Shape ● Zoom ● Microsoft Whiteboard ● Google Docs and Slides ● Microsoft Word | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Mentimeter ● Slido ● Zoom |

- A document called [Doing Fieldwork in a Pandemic](#) by Deborah Lupton from UNSW was also recommended as it shares methods for avoiding in-person interactions by using mediated forms that will achieve similar ends.
- The AES group were polled on the issues they are most concerned about when evaluating in a COVID-19 world. The main concerns were:
 - Learning new ways of working remotely and carrying out evaluations (61%)
 - Technology to support my evaluations (48%)
 - Remote evaluations and equity concerns (48%)
 - Remote evaluations and ethical considerations (39%)

Participants were then broken up into virtual groups where they could talk about their current situation, what was working well and what were the challenges and opportunities. Some themes reported back to the whole group include:

- Different experiences for internal and external evaluators, whether moving online, evolving, postponing or stopping altogether.

- Barriers to participation due to lack of technology, cultural norms, or workforce currently being inaccessible.
- Challenges in using participatory evaluation approaches with the community, especially if they cannot access technology or they are not ready to embrace it.
- Timing of surveys and how much of a COVID-19 lens you put on them as this will change how people will answer the questions.
- Looking at current and future opportunities in how evaluations are undertaken, including embracing a mix of face-to-face and online methods in the future.

The overall session was a good opportunity to connect with evaluators in the changing COVID-19 environment. It allowed evaluators to reflect on not just the challenges, but also the opportunities that the situation has created. This time of reflection also helped the evaluators understand what changes are needed so that evaluations can be more equitable in the future.

