

A Developmental Evaluation Primer

Jamie A.A. Gamble

The J.W. McConnell
Family Foundation



About the Foundation

Established in 1937 by philanthropist and entrepreneur John Wilson McConnell, The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation funds projects in Canada that foster citizen engagement, build resilient communities and have the potential for national scale or impact.

Our vision at The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation is a Canada where all people have the opportunity to develop their potential and contribute to the betterment of their communities and country.

Over the years, the ways to achieve this have evolved; what remains central to its purpose is the importance of community, how people contribute, and the Foundation's need to make choices in its granting decisions, to take risks, to learn and to be engaged with its grantees.

In the process of developing and supporting programs, the Foundation has come to appreciate better the importance of innovation, the exploring of new and effective ways of addressing intractable social problems, and the challenge of ensuring that these new approaches are sustained.

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Printed on Rolland Enviro100, which contains 100% recycled post-consumer fibre, is EcoLogo, processed chlorine-free, FSC Recycled certified and manufactured using biogas energy.

Foreword

A primer has historically meant a book of *first principles*. That characterization fits this primer quite nicely. The principles presented here emerged from highly interactive workshops with a group of developmental evaluators representing premier Canadian organizations.¹ Just as developmental evaluation (DE) is a dynamic, emergent process, those workshops, spanning two years, were highly dynamic and emergent. The principles and premises captured so well here by Jamie Gamble reflect the insights generated from the developmental process of experimenting with diverse applications of developmental evaluation in innovative organizations across Canada.

Synchronicity played a role, as often occurs in highly dynamic and emergent processes. As the developmental evaluation workshops were taking place, I was working with Frances Westley and Brenda Zimmerman on a book about the implications of complexity theory for social innovation. That book, *Getting to Maybe: How the World Is Changed*,² was launched at the final DE workshop in Toronto at the end of 2006. Sessions with my co-authors working on the book often preceded or followed DE workshops, each influencing and intricately connected with the other. Indeed, I would suggest that this *Developmental Evaluation Primer* and the *Getting to Maybe* book might well be thought of as a matched pair. *Getting to Maybe* provides the philosophical and theoretical context and background for developmental evaluation practice. This *Developmental Evaluation Primer* provides concrete guidance for implementing the ideas offered and explored in *Getting to Maybe*.

Getting to Maybe introduces the idea of developmental evaluation as an approach especially adapted to the emergent uncertainties of social innovations in complex environments, but doesn't say how to actually do it. Since publication of the book, I have been inundated with requests for more details and operational guidance. How does one really engage in developmental evaluation? How is it different from other traditional forms of evaluation? Under what circumstances is it appropriate to undertake developmental evaluation? What special skills are needed? What results from a developmental evaluation?

¹ See appendix B for a list of participating organizations.

² Published by Random House Canada.

My response to these questions has been, “Be patient. The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation is supporting publication of an excellent primer on developmental evaluation. It will answer all of your questions.” Well, maybe not *all*. That would not be consistent with developmental evaluation as an emergent, exploring, learning-oriented and adaptive process in which those involved discover answers to their own situationally specific questions. But this primer will tell you how to get started on and stay true to that developmental process.

And for those questions not answered here? The answers, as the poet says, are blowing in the wind. Listen to the wind. Listen. The wind in this case is the dynamic unfolding of your own innovation and inquiry, which is to say, the answers will emerge from the process and won’t be known until you engage in and reflect on the process. Don’t expect to have all of the answers to how to do this at the beginning, or even at the end. But developmental evaluation will help you be clear about where you started, what forks in the road you took and why, what you learned along the way, and where you ended up, at least for a moment in time, before the next gust of wind.

Michael Quinn Patton

Former President of the American Evaluation Association

Author, *Utilization-Focused Evaluation and Qualitative Research*
and Evaluation Methods (Sage, 1997 and 2002)

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If there is one issue that bedevils grantees and grant-makers alike, it is evaluation. Once one leaves the domain of straightforward projects with clearly defined outcomes, one enters into a minefield. Mismatched expectations regarding anticipated results, inappropriate evaluation methodologies, a reluctance to share the risks inherent in trying new approaches...all these and more create frustration and, often, distrust.

The J. W. McConnell Family Foundation encourages innovative ways to address complex social problems. We have learned that the straitjacket of many conventional evaluation methods impedes the flexibility required for grantees to experiment, test, learn and, where necessary, revise their programs. This gave rise to the concept of developmental evaluation under the leadership of Dr. Michael Quinn Patton, using a workshop of social change practitioners with whom the Foundation has worked, with the strong support of DuPont Canada.

We welcome this primer prepared by Jamie Gamble and hope that it furthers the goal of encouraging innovative solutions to important social challenges.

Tim Brodhead
President and CEO
The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation



DuPont Canada

Social Innovation is a strategic segment of Community Investing at DuPont. The mission of this strategic segment of DuPont giving is: "To foster innovation that will create leaps in productivity and impact in the social sector. We will do this by developing the capacities of leaders and leading-edge organizations; promoting social innovation; and developing and applying social innovation methodologies."

The McGill-DuPont initiative was key in advancing this mission. In 2002 McGill University and DuPont Canada partnered to explore the parameters of social innovation and to organize existing thinking into a form accessible to practitioners. It was through this initiative that DuPont was introduced to Dr. Michael Quinn Patton and the emerging methodology, developmental evaluation.

DuPont Canada proudly sponsored the series of developmental evaluation workshops that came to life with the support of The J.W. McConnell Foundation under the Sustaining Social Innovation (SSI) umbrella.

Lori Summers
Community Investing Manager
DuPont Canada

1

Introduction to Developmental Evaluation

The intent of this document is to introduce the concept of developmental evaluation to potential users and to provide some tools to support its use.

The work to explore developmental evaluation was part of the SSI Initiative,³ a two-year collaboration (2005–2006) between The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, DuPont Canada, and the PLAN Institute for Caring Citizenship. Its purpose was to examine the capacity of social innovation to address intractable social problems in Canada. The three organizations saw developmental evaluation as a means to track the methods and procedures involved in social innovation, processes that are often difficult to evaluate. The practice of developmental evaluation was further refined in a series of developmental workshops.⁴ Examples from the experiences of the workshop participants can be found throughout this text.

While this primer includes examples of developmental evaluation being applied in innovative projects, it is an embryonic discipline and new ideas about it are still emerging.

A special thanks to Michael Quinn Patton for his insight, guidance and contribution to this work and to the group of evaluators who were part of the developmental evaluation workshops. Their ideas and perspectives made a major contribution to this document.

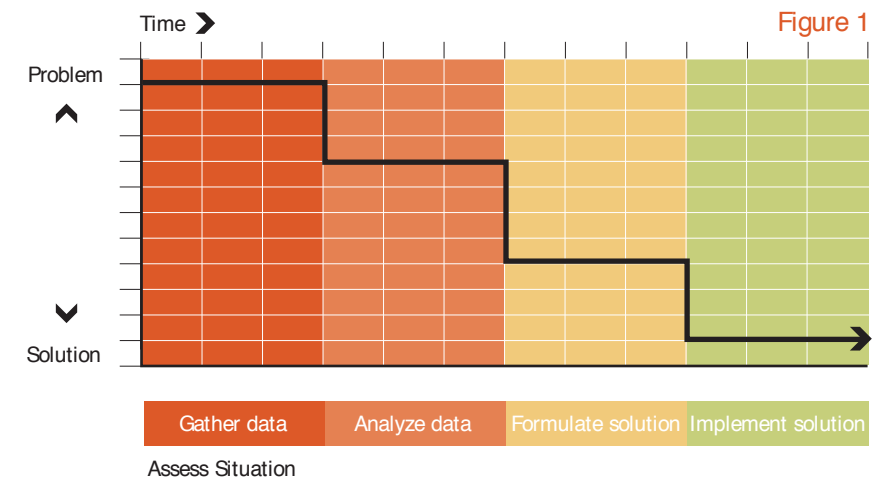
³ For more information on SSI, please see The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation website, www.mcconnellfoundation.ca.

⁴ See Appendix B for a list of the participating organizations.

1.1

What is Developmental Evaluation?

Developmental evaluation supports the process of innovation within an organization and in its activities. Initiatives that are innovative are often in a state of continuous development and adaptation, and they frequently unfold in a changing and unpredictable environment. This intentional effort to innovate is a kind of organizational exploration. The destination is often a notion rather than a crisp image, and the path forward may be unclear. Much is in flux: the framing of the issue can change, how the problem is conceptualized evolves and various approaches are likely to be tested. Adaptations are largely driven by new learning and by changes in participants, partners and context.

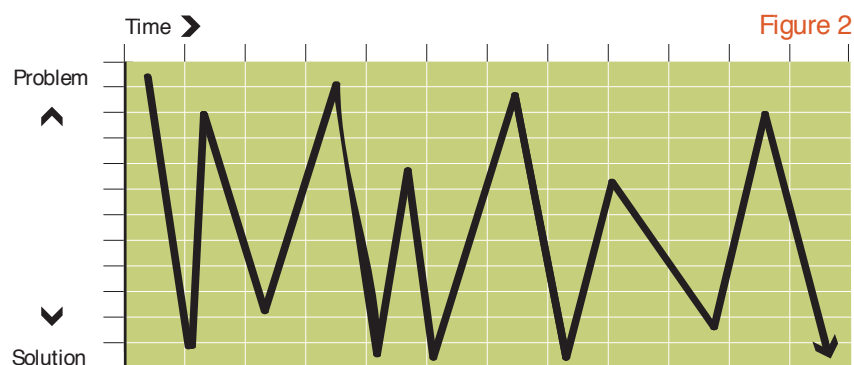


The dominant approach to solving problems is that of logic. There is a natural sequence of steps that moves us from problem to solution.⁵ We move methodically from assessing the situation to gathering and analyzing data, formulating a solution and then implementing that solution (see Figure 1). This linear logical approach works very well when the problem is well understood;⁶ there are clear boundaries and there is a limited set of possible solutions, of which there is likely one that is optimal. Current evaluation is generally built around supporting this kind of problem solving. Summative evaluations render judgments about the merit, worth and value of a standardized program. Formative evaluations help a program become an effective and dependable model.⁷

⁵ Special thanks to Mark Cabaj for contributing to the thinking about different kinds of problems.

⁶ We might call this kind of problem simple or even technical.

⁷ For more detail on summative and formative evaluations, see Sandra Mathison (ed.) (2005). *Encyclopedia of Evaluation*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.



The challenge for evaluators, and for problem solvers, is that not all problems are bounded, have optimal solutions, or occur within stable parameters. These kinds of problems – called complex, or ‘wicked’ – are difficult to define. This is the place where innovators often find themselves. When innovating within a complex system, it is difficult to understand the ramifications of changes. The dynamics of a complex system have a high degree of connectivity and interdependence. There are diverse elements whose interactions create unpredictable, emergent results.

Instead of the logical steps outlined in Figure 1, the experience of innovating often looks more like what is outlined in Figure 2 – rapidly moving back and forth between problem and solution. A solution may initially appear ideal, but does not get at what was intended, so the problem needs to be re-examined in light of what was learned in that experience. Or, a solution may be crafted that excludes a critical stakeholder and the definition needs to be re-worked so that they, and their contributions to the solution, can be included. This description tends to resonate with people’s experiences in innovative situations; it is familiar to those who have worked on stubborn social issues, like poverty, or anyone who has experienced the process of policy making.

The very techniques that enable evaluation excellence in more static situations – standardization of inputs, consistency of treatment, uniformity of outcomes and clarity of causal linkages – are unhelpful, even harmful, to situations where there is a lot of uncertainty and ‘moving goalposts’. Making a judgment of merit or worth

based on efficient goal attainment, replicability and clarity of causal links works for a well-defined technology or intervention. With dynamic and unpredictable phenomena, however, these same criteria can actually so narrowly define and structure the evaluative questions as to interfere with learning and adaptability. Innovation is often about breaking previous boundaries. Developmental evaluation is more suitable in such situations because it supports the process of innovation in ways that enable exploration and development.

	Situation ⁸
Summative evaluation	At the end of a program or initiative when key decisions about its future are going to be made. When judging the model’s merit or worth for continuation, expansion, going to scale, or other major decisions.
Formative evaluation	When fine-tuning a model. When a future summative evaluation is expected and baseline data will likely be needed.
Developmental evaluation	When working in situations of high complexity. When working on early stage social innovations.

Innovation is commonly understood to be the introduction of something new and useful. For the purposes of developmental evaluation, it is important to make some distinctions. Developmental evaluation applies to an ongoing process of innovation in which both the path and the destination are evolving. It differs from making improvements along the way to a clearly defined goal. Where more traditional approaches to evaluation try to predict the outcomes of the innovation and focus measurement on those goals, developmental evaluation is intended to support innovation within a context of uncertainty. The ‘developmental’ in developmental evaluation is based on the innovation driving change. Social change innovation occurs when there is a change in practice, policies, programs or resource flows. Innovation is distinct from improvement in that it causes reorganization at a systems level and can occur at the level of an organization, a network or society at large.

⁸ There may be summative moments during an emerging, complex project; for example, a group may get feedback that their understanding of an issue was not accurate and that, as a result, their particular strategies are not working, leading to a decision to test a different approach.

Evaluation is about critical thinking; development is about creative thinking. Often these two types of thinking are seen to be mutually exclusive, but developmental evaluation is about holding them in balance. What developmental evaluation does is combine the rigour of evaluation, being evidence-based and objective, with the role of organizational development coaching, which is change-oriented and relational.

To do this, the evaluator is positioned as a part of the team that is working to conceptualize, design and test new approaches. The evaluator's primary role is to bring evaluative thinking into the process of development and intentional change. The developmental evaluator is there to introduce reality testing into the process of innovation. Feedback is supported by data and is delivered in an interactive way that helps the innovator(s) to fine-tune what is going on, consider and adapt to uncertainties and inform decisions. Developmental evaluation facilitates assessments of where things are and reveals how things are unfolding; helps to discern which directions hold promise and which ought to be abandoned; and suggests what new experiments should be tried.

Developmental evaluation also takes into account changes to an organization – to its structure, governance, relationships – inasmuch as they constitute an important context within which innovation takes place. The evaluator may introduce strategic and integrating questions to clarify some of the ambiguity that accompanies organizational change.

Developmental evaluation may also consider the dynamics of collaboration itself. Complex problems tend to require the integration of diverse perspectives from different parts of a system. Various stakeholders may understand the problem differently and enter into an initiative with diverse reference points. Within this diversity, there is still a need to develop and execute strategies. DE helps collaborators to recognize and work through differences in perception that might otherwise fragment the work and hamper ongoing developments.

Developmental evaluation makes use of methods familiar to evaluation: surveys, interviews and observations, among others. There are also some tools from complexity science that hold promise for informing developmental evaluation. This paper explores

some of these methods – the “how” of developmental evaluation – and takes a deeper look at the question of when developmental evaluation is appropriate and who can fill the role of a developmental evaluator.

Ultimately developmental evaluation is about rigorous inquiry for development. It is being intentional about using data in a meaningful way to inform innovation in progress. The product or result of a successful developmental evaluation process is informed changes in what is being evaluated.

Given the innovation and complexity orientation, developmental evaluation is best suited for organizations in which:

- innovation is identified as a core value;
- there is an iterative loop of option generation, testing and selection;
- board and staff are in agreement about innovation and willing to take risks;
- there is a high degree of uncertainty about the path forward;
- there are resources available for ongoing exploration; and
- the organization has a culture suited to exploration and enquiry.

The table below describes three key features of a developmental evaluation :

1. Framing the issue

Social innovators are mobilized by a powerful sense that something needs to change. They may have a new perspective or approach to a historically stubborn issue, or may see, in a new way, the intersection between multiple issues. As innovators work on these issues, their understanding moves from a vague understanding to increased clarity. New learning may cause a shift in thinking which prompts another cycle of uncertainty and clarification. Developmental evaluation supports innovators in the conceptualization and articulation of the problem, by helping to frame the issue and its dynamics.

2. Testing quick iterations

Many people who develop and deliver social programs naturally experiment.¹⁰ New ways of doing something are tried, often based on feedback loops and perspective about changing needs and demands, which can lead to improvements. Developmental evaluation brings a measure of rigour to the learning generated from these experiments. As new programs roll out, leaders intuitively make observations and refinements. These lessons are usually part of what is our natural private learning processes. Developmental evaluation is intended to make visible the intuitive and the tacit. Applying developmental evaluation means being more systematic about subjecting relevant data and observations to interpretation and judgment.

3. Tracking the trajectory of the innovation

A standard characteristic of problem solving is that once the problem solver experiences the “eureka moment,” the path to the solution seems obvious. When innovators look at projects retrospectively, the description of going from beginning to end appears seamless and direct. Key insights about how something was successfully accomplished are often inaccessible, which doesn't help the next person trying to solve a similar problem, or the original innovator in trying to apply the learning process in other situations. Developmental evaluation records the roads not taken, unintended consequences, incremental adjustments, tensions and sudden opportunities. The tracking reveals what it takes to create something new, which serves two purposes: 1) it makes the decisionmaking along this path more transparent and 2) it generates valuable data useful for dissemination. Such documentation also supports accountability while allowing for a high degree of flexibility.

¹⁰ The ability to experiment will vary from situation to situation. Some situations allow for rapid and low cost reconfiguration, where others require a larger investment involving significant sunk costs. The cost of something not working out is also a factor.

1.2

Myths about Developmental Evaluation

Myth # 5: Developmental evaluation downplays accountability

The accountability of developmental evaluation rests in its ability to support development. If nothing is developed, it has failed. Learning what does and doesn't work is a type of development. Deeper questions may be a developmental result, but something must be developed. **The Nature Conservancy of Canada** applied a developmental evaluation lens to its process of disseminating the Conservation Volunteers program from Ontario to Alberta. This provided a way to share what was happening with their funder while maintaining a high degree of flexibility and experimentation in how that process unfolded.

Myth # 6: Developmental evaluation is the same as participatory evaluation

Participatory evaluation is about a distinction in *approach*, where developmental evaluation is about a distinction in *purpose*. Participatory approaches can be used to inform summative, formative and developmental evaluations. Developmental evaluation is particularly oriented to supporting early stage innovations in complex environments. A participatory approach makes a lot of sense in developmental evaluation because of the need for high trust and quick feedback.

1.3

Assessing Conditions for DE

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