

Innovating for Impact: Evaluation and Learning in Canada's Skills Ecosystem

The Future Skills Centre (FSC) Community of Practice (CoP) is a pan-Canadian network for skills and workforce development stakeholders across diverse sectors and industries to connect, share, and learn from each other. As part of the CoP, Research Impact Canada, in collaboration with FSC, hosts themed Peer Learning Groups to facilitate open discussions among peers on relevant topics.

On February 19, 2025, Research Impact Canada and the Future Skills Centre hosted a Peer Learning Group called **Innovating for Impact: Evaluation and Learning in Canada's Skills Ecosystem**. The goal of the peer learning group was to facilitate an open discussion among participants in an informal, safe, shared space.

In this session, [Marshal Rodrigues](#), Associate Director from [Blueprint](#), discussed myths and misconceptions about evaluation and showcased practical evaluation tools and resources that participants can use in their day-to-day work. Attendees shared initiatives at their own organizations where they have successfully conducted evidence generation in the skills and workforce development sector. Participants were then invited to join small breakout groups for free-flowing moderated discussions, responding to the question:

How can we right-size our evaluation to our initiatives? What tools and strategies have you used that you have found to be useful?

WHAT WE HEARD




The myth of impact being everything. In many organizations, 'impact' has become the buzzword when it comes to evaluation. However, it is important to recognize that impact is a continuum that may not necessarily be captured in a few short-term outcomes. It helps to negotiate those evaluation requirements with funders, senior leaders, and even staff on how to balance different types of evaluations – e.g., ranging from descriptive to developmental to deep impact measurement - so that impact can be measured more realistically within its context.




Planning for the end from the beginning. Participants debated on whether evaluation should focus on implementation or outcomes achieved. A solution is to start early at the beginning rather than at the end of a project for evaluation. Set clear objectives by engaging with stakeholders to understand their needs, which would help define the goal(s) of the evaluation and measurements of success. This will also help elucidate the stories that should be told as part of the evaluation process.



Tell a story when demonstrating the results of an evaluation. Participants discussed instances where some institutions collect a lot of data, but have not been able to tell cohesive stories with a compelling narrative. Participants suggested creating a plan on how to effectively collect usable data and what kinds of usable data should be collected to help build a reliable narrative at the end for storytelling and impact. Ask yourself, "What do we want to know and why is it important?"

Have flexibility when capturing data. Survey engagements can be challenging. However,  integrating data collection into interactive activities in real-time can help with garnering a higher response rate, as well as making surveys short and concise. If participant responses are still low, consider supplementing survey data with operational or administrative data, linking the project to other external datasets (e.g., Statistics Canada), or shifting to more engaging methods, like one-on-one interviews. There is immense value in using open-ended questions to capture qualitative data, such as anecdotes. Finally, consider a peer-learning approach where researchers collaborate with evaluators to gain high-quality insights.

Right-sizing evaluation takes time - do not be afraid to explore.  We know that organizations have varying capacities when it comes to evaluation and it can be difficult to balance what is feasible to measure versus what stakeholders (e.g., funders) want to know. It helps to build awareness with stakeholders from the get-go about feasibility so that evaluation expectations are properly managed. Then, starting small with exploratory evaluations before gradually building into a larger capacity can help organizations find an appropriate strategy that works for them and others. The [logic model](#) was also mentioned as a useful tool for aligning stakeholders' expectations at different stages of a project.

WHAT WE HEARD



Using artificial intelligence (AI) tools for evaluation.

AI tools can be helpful for project management, data collection, and analysis. Examples include [Chat GPT](#), [Gemini](#), and [Spinach](#). However, it is equally as important to look at what is not being captured or measured and to check for inherent bias when using AI tools. Ask yourself, “Whose voices are missing?” There were also concerns about data accessibility and data sharing, particularly with smaller organizations that may not have sufficient resources to conduct full evaluations. Issues of privacy and confidentiality were also brought up as user and organizational data are often stored on digital platforms outside of Canada, such as [Zoom](#) and [Otter](#).



Evaluation culture can be built from the ground up.

Some of the key challenges discussed included evaluating the organization as a whole when internal teams work in silos and having ineffective evaluation frameworks imposed from the top down.

In such cases, managing up to promote a culture of effective and meaningful evaluation can help. It is instrumental to find and work with the people around you who are on board with building a culture of evidence gathering and shifting to a data-driven mindset as well as being open to exploring ways to influence or adapt existing evaluation frameworks.

Measuring collective impact can be difficult, but not impossible.

Participants asked how, when building organizational frameworks, to keep collective impact in mind. They wanted to know how impact can be evaluated across multiple organizations rather than as individual institutions, including considerations of broader, cross-sector collaboration in evaluation efforts. A solution discussed was using the [systems theory of change](#) as a starting point because the theory analyzes how changes in one part of the system can influence another with cascading effects. An organization can start with the baseline impact they are already having within their scope and level and look at the higher level of impact that can be achieved and see how they can contribute to that change with others.



RESOURCE COMPILATION

Here are some of the resources shared by the participants during the PLG.

Building Trust and Partnerships

[2025 Edelman Trust Barometer](#): Building trust with stakeholders is a vital component of evaluation. However, trust has become a challenge in today’s environment. The Edelman Trust Barometer gauges the level of global trust in businesses and organizations. Organizations can use this report to better understand and navigate building trust with stakeholders in the current 2025 climate of political polarization and grievance.

[A Start-to-Finish Guide to Building and Navigating](#)

[Partnerships](#): This module teaches how to develop strong, effective partnerships with stakeholders for knowledge exchange and real-world application of research. You’ll learn to identify potential partners, approach them, and build relationships based on mutual respect and shared goals. You’ll also learn general principles and common practices for navigating different types of partnerships, including those for knowledge mobilization and impact.

AI Tools for Evaluation

[SimpleSurvey](#): This is a digital data collection and reporting tool based in Canada that complies with Canadian data privacy laws, including the Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act (PIPEDA). This makes it ideal for organizations concerned with data sovereignty. It also offers high security and encryption standards and has bilingual functionality.

[Microsoft Co-Pilot](#): This AI tool is integrated into Microsoft 365 applications like Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Outlook, and Teams, which makes it easier to support evaluation processes across different areas, including performance assessments, program evaluation, and data analysis. The tool enhances productivity by automating tasks such as document generation, data analysis, content summarization, and workflow optimization.

[Critically Evaluating AI Tools](#): While there is no storage of AI tools to use for evaluation purposes, it is important to critically evaluate those tools before deploying them for evaluation uses. This guide is a quick reminder to check for accuracy, bias, and ethical implications using the acronym, VALID-AI.

RESOURCE COMPILATION

Impact Evaluation

[CART Principles](#): When funded programs are under pressure to demonstrate impact, employing the CART principles can help guide organizations on how to conduct credible, actionable, responsible, and transportable impact evaluations.

[The Tamarack Collective Impact Toolkit](#): This toolkit contains a detailed list of Collective Impact tools, articles, webinars, videos, and resources curated by Tamarack Institute for member communities and key partners. The toolkit is organized into eight chapters, following the key components of the Collective Impact framework and are broken down into Primary, Secondary and Diving Deeper sections.

[Evaluation of the New Horizons for Seniors Program](#): An example of a collective impact evaluation of a national program offered through the Employment and Social Development Canada (EDSC). Insights may be gained for others who are looking to conduct similar collective impact evaluations.

[Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning \(MERL\)](#): The MERL is a framework that uses four disciplines to help improve programs: monitoring, evaluation, research, and learning. It is a holistic approach to capturing, interpreting, and applying knowledge to ensure effective and efficient project outcomes, especially for complex designs in complex environments.

Creating a Compelling Narrative

[Storytelling for Impact - Humanizing the Numbers](#): While statistics may be important, it is also critical to communicate the stories of people behind these numbers through a narrative. A person's story can make the narrative more compelling and engaging. This module on storytelling for knowledge mobilization is designed to teach the importance of incorporating narratives into the results and how to effectively craft and deliver those stories.

[Infographic Design for Knowledge Mobilization](#): Infographic design is a useful skill for conveying messages because it allows complex information to be presented in a visually engaging and easily understandable format. This makes the message accessible and can help communicate results and its implications to a variety of stakeholders.

[Narrative Assessment](#): Narrative assessment revolves around building stories about advocacy and its subsequent usage for learning, monitoring, evaluation, and communication. The stories unveil what happened, how, and why. This toolkit shows how to build those stories with a purpose and how they can be used.

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