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Recently, I had the opportunity to review the Bruner Foundation's evaluation web portal, *Evaluative Thinking* (http://www.evaluativethinking.org).[1] This portal is part of the foundation's longstanding commitment to the effectiveness and evaluation of non-profit services. Many of you may be familiar with its Rochester Effectiveness Partnership (REP) that brought together non-profit providers of services, funders and evaluation professionals in Rochester, N.Y., who were committed to improving the effectiveness of their work through extensive training, peer learning and guided evaluation practice.

For anyone who engages with the philanthropic sector, I recommend you check out this web portal, *Evaluative Thinking*.

By way of background on my qualifications to review this web portal, I have spent the better part of the last 11 years leading evaluation in several foundations, and the earlier part of my career as an evaluation practitioner. A lot has changed in that time with regard to the way in which foundations think about, conduct, interact with, and communicate about evaluation. A lot has also changed about the way in which foundations engage with grantees and other funders around evaluation. During this period, of the few foundations that engaged in evaluation practice at all, it was often removed from program improvement or grantee benefit. Few shared any evaluation findings. In the old days, among those few foundations that shared what they were learning,

reports were long and complicated and transmitted by postal mail. The costs of those mailings were exorbitant and with unclear benefit or reach. Then we progressed to transmitting those long and dense reports by attaching them to emails and hoped that the recipients' email systems could handle receiving such large attachments. The cost of transmission dropped significantly, but we were still unclear if anyone actually read those reports. Rare was the foundation that included the grantee perspective in the design of those evaluations, and fewer still who supported grantees to participate actively in evaluative activities.

Fast forward to 2013.

Upon first being asked to review the Bruner Foundation's *Evaluative Thinking* web portal (but without having looked at it), my reaction was both optimism and skepticism. The optimism is derived from my appreciation of the Bruner Foundation's longstanding commitment to evaluation, directly within the communities in which it works, and indirectly to the philanthropic and nonprofit communities more broadly. The Bruner Foundation has consistently demonstrated its commitment to being progressive and innovative in its approach to evaluation and learning. Now the Bruner Foundation has evolved that culture and practice through the launching of its expanded and re-organized web portal, *Evaluative Thinking*. My skepticism came from wondering what, if anything, I would find that was new or useful from the perspective of foundation effectiveness.

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[1] Accessed December 27, 2013.

This *Evaluative Thinking* site contains detailed information about the Foundation's 15-year commitment to supporting evaluation and evaluative thinking. It is intended to be a resource for nonprofit and funding organizations exploring ways to build evaluative capacity – *the integrating of evaluation skills and evaluative thinking into everyday organizational practice to ensure not only stronger programs but also stronger, more effective organizations.*

I found *Evaluative Thinking* to be a helpful and practical website for those engaged in the philanthropic sector. *Evaluative Thinking* contained some of what I consider key ingredients in communicating about one's approach to evaluation: A statement about evaluation values; articulated definitions of key terms such as evaluation capacity and evaluative thinking; and what it takes to get support from the foundation; and intended purpose of evaluation. In other links, they define for us what they mean by strategy, initiative and program.

Some may question why such common terms need to be defined at all, and why it would be helpful to commit them to a website. As anyone engaged in strategy, planning, programming, or evaluation can attest, our internal definitions of these terms vary widely, with implications for operationalization and implementation, and ultimately the success of those strategies. When strategy and evaluation purpose are explicit, and there is alignment between funder and partners, we are more likely to be successful. While committing these intentions to a website hardly assures success, it is an important early step toward achieving the outcomes we collectively seek.

Key components of the Foundation's evaluation capacity building work are listed on the left. Each is linked to specific programs/projects that illustrate the type of training or support.

The individual project descriptions include categories such as participant selection process, time commitment, costs, results and challenges. There are direct links to full reports for each.

Displays of project information by time and cost, as well as direct access to evaluation training resources are available by selecting the navigation bars above.

The only significant criticism of the web portal relates to navigation, not content. First, finding the site is not obvious. Typing "Bruner evaluative thinking" into a search engine (which is what most of us would do) takes you to their *Effectiveness Initiatives* page, not a page labeled *Evaluative Thinking*. This might confuse some people. Starting from the Bruner Foundation home page, it also displays an Effectiveness Initiatives tab, which is the *Evaluative Thinking* web portal.

A few modifications would have made my tour of the web portal a little easier:

- A description of the site on the home page. (Currently it can be found under a link for 'capacity building strategies' (http://www.effectivenessprojects.org).
- A road map for the site. The user could benefit from an overview of how to navigate around the site.
- Consistency in drilling down to more detail. Some items are mouse-overs, while others are click-through. On the left hand side, there are resources and projects. These lists mostly map to the resources and projects that can be found on each individual page, but not always.

Over the years, there are a few foundation websites that I regularly consult and refer to for evaluation resources and reports, and to which I comfortably refer other foundation colleagues: W.K. Kellogg Foundation, James Irvine Foundation, and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, to name a few.

The Bruner Foundation *Evaluative Thinking* web portal is not a substitute for these. However, it is a helpful one-stop site for resources for funders and their partners on evaluation capacity building and evaluative thinking.

One caveat for evaluation practitioners: The intended audience for this web portal is not for

evaluation experts. You will not find technical information about evaluation design or analysis. However, it is useful for those who are seeking resources for clients including funders, non-profit organizations, organizational development people, and others.

While the *Evaluative Thinking* website may not be revolutionary, the transparency of the Bruner Foundation's evaluation values, expectations, approach, resources and reports is commendable. And like the Bruner Foundation's interest in supporting local capacity with the possibility of broader influence, their *Evaluative Thinking* website achieves the same contributions.

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