

PEP-UP: A REVIEW OF THE UMGENI VALLEY PROJECT EVALUATION PROCESS

Tim Wright

The evaluation process at the Umgeni Valley Project is described. Its evolution, background and past strategies are outlined and staff reaction to, and participation in, the process are discussed. Comment is made on the overall value of the exercise and the possible future direction of the evaluation.

INTRODUCTION

Evaluation has become a critical issue in Environmental Education circles in Southern Africa. The 'judgemental' style of evaluation lifted from the commercial world, while satisfactory to sponsors, has proved counter productive when used in an educational context. This situation has sparked a great deal of theorizing (Odendaal, 1986; O'Donoghue, 1986), much of it controversial, but a degree of clarity has been achieved. While the theorizing has continued the people who *do* the work have waited anxiously, knowing the outcome was going to have a marked effect on their future, and yet were effectively excluded from the debate.

The applied phase has begun, however, and this paper seeks to outline the approach applied to the Umgeni Valley Project. The essence of the approach was *participatory* (involving all staff members) and *process orientated* i.e. *optimising inherent good* without being negatively judgemental about the apparently bad. Time will tell how successful the approach has been but the fact that all participants felt the exercise was useful and no longer feel threatened by the concept of evaluation, indicates a major breakthrough.

WHY AN EVALUATION?

The concept of 'an evaluation' of the Umgeni Valley Project was first raised at a meeting of the Umgeni Valley Project Committee in 1985 and, after extensive correspondence, meetings and discussions, was finally initiated at the beginning of 1987. This article is an attempt to record the process and the reaction to the initial internal programme, as well as to comment on its value. It must be stressed that these are from the perspectives of the Umgeni Valley Project education staff.

Five major factors contributed to the perceived need for evaluation of the Umgeni Valley Project.

- *A time perspective:* During the eleven years of its existence, the Umgeni Valley Project has grown from an outdoor conservation education programme to a very diverse Environmental Education strategy, the evolution of which was largely attributable to changing trends and demands. With the imminent launching of a further Wildlife Society environmental education project at Treasure Beach near Durban, it became essential to take stock of the objectives, strategies and effectiveness of the project.
- *Internal factors:* Being a member-organisation, any project of the Wildlife Society needs to render account of its efficacy, financial viability, compatibility with stated aims and objectives, future planning and development strategies. Because of the diversity of its membership, an independent, professional evaluation seemed an appropriate way to render such an account.
- *External factors:* Competition in the field of fund-raising, particularly for the large sums necessary for Treasure Beach, underlined the need

for a document that would serve as an affirmation of the Natal Branch Environmental Education Committee's endeavours.

- *Rationalization of aims and objectives:* In September 1985 a staff workshop was held to clarify the aims, objectives and *modus operandi* of the Umgeni Valley Project. This exercise emphasized the need to measure to what extent statements of intent and operational reality were compatible and an evaluation appeared to be the ideal means of gauging this. This was to become the basis from which the "PEP-UP" programme was launched (UVP, 1985).
- *Evaluation in Environmental Education:* It had become apparent within Environmental Education circles that a methodology for evaluation of Environmental Education programmes was vital to the further development of Environmental Education in Southern Africa. The Umgeni Valley Project being (probably) the largest established programme, with the advantage of being a non-government (and therefore more experimental and flexible) organization seemed an obvious starting point.

BACKGROUND TO THE NATURE OF THE EVALUATION

Prof. Pat Irwin was approached by the Wildlife Society to direct the evaluation programme. He in turn, with the approval of the Society, constituted a team of evaluators who in this paper are subsequently referred to as 'the consultants'. The final team consisted of:

Prof. Pat Irwin - University of Bophuthatswana
Mr. Rob O'Donoghue - Natal Parks Board
Dr. Frances Gamble - President, Environmental Education Association of Southern Africa
Mr. Flip van den Berg - Natal Education Department.

This group, insisting that they were facilitating the evaluation as educationists, indicated that the internal and external factors referred to above would not be of immediate concern to them. Three vital issues concerning the nature and function of the evaluation were listed by Irwin (1986) and clarified at a subsequent meeting in September 1986. Following Irwin, 'the evaluation' was not to be viewed as "some kind of fixed absolute final product, but a process which once initiated may be continued indefinitely" and "Evaluation is about the development and enhancement of a programme by identifying its strengths and weaknesses and by seeking ways of constantly improving and optimising its functions".

Irwin summarised the approach to the evaluation thus:

"We see ourselves carrying out what is termed 'a responsive participatory evaluation' rather than a 'judgemental evaluation'. It is our firm conviction that the former is not only a preferable procedure but will be of greater value to the Wildlife Society. This means, in short, that we will involve all staff, including the director, in a process of critical self-evaluation and participation in the evaluation of each particular element of the project. The evaluators will not fulfil the role of inspectors, but will provide procedures, parameters and guidance for the evaluation process. By the end we would like staff not only to have participated in the conclusions

reached but to have become sufficiently convinced of and familiar with the process to continue an in-house evaluation programme. The director and his staff will thus be an integral part of their own evaluation. This approach is clearly designed to be non-threatening to your staff, which is both an educationally and managerially sound approach. It is furthermore likely to produce results every bit as incisive as an 'inspectorial approach' which would have a significantly negative connotation."

It is around these statements that the entire 'initial fieldwork' phase of the process, as it occurred during 1987 at the Umgeni Valley Project, revolves. It is intended in this paper to outline how this was implemented, the reactions of members of staff to the process and to what extent it was successful.

In order to introduce the concept and process of evaluation to the education staff of the Umgeni Valley Project, a handy descriptive term had to be found to avoid constant reference to 'the evaluation', suggesting a thing or product, rather than a process, whilst at the same time abbreviating terms like 'the process of responsive participatory evaluation'. Conveniently, an acrostic was found which was both descriptive of the goal and referred to all components:

P articipatory
E valuation
P rogramme = PEP-UP
U mgeni Valley
P roject

EVALUATION STRATEGY

Following a meeting between the consultants, the Director and the Principal Education Officer, it was decided that a list of existing evaluation strategies used at the Umgeni Valley Project be drawn up as a point of departure. These were to be developed into an ongoing process-orientated strategy. From this stage onwards there was very close liaison between O'Donoghue and the Umgeni Valley Project staff, so much so that he was eventually viewed almost as a member of the staff with the portfolio of evaluation facilitator. There was no further formal contact with the other consultants until the 1987 report (UVP, 1987a) and the interim working documents were compiled and referred to them by the Director for comment before a strategy meeting during February 1988. O'Donoghue however conferred with the other consultants on a regular basis.

A plan of action (UVP, 1987b) for the initial fieldwork phase was developed by the staff to achieve the following goals:

1. An illuminative description of the purpose and significance of the project.
2. Descriptions of activities and evaluation indicators of what takes place during the education programme.
3. Enhancement of the programme's quality through the researching and resolution of problems, issues and areas of doubt. The document recording the proceedings of the September 1985 'Aims and Objectives Workshop' (UVP, 1985) was used as a point of departure and to focus the evaluation programme on significant constituents of the education programmes and issues that deserved to be examined.

From staff responses to the existing aims and objectives document a set of working documents were developed. These reflected all staff perceptions of intent and descriptions of 'what is happening out there'. It was envisaged that the initial fieldwork programme of PEP-UP would be in three cyclic phases:

and group workshops to refine the content of working documents and to note areas that need to be clarified and investigated during phase one.

- *Phase Two - The Intensive Fieldwork Phase:* Investigation and evaluation of issues that need to be clarified and researched following phase one.
- *Phase Three - The Summary and Recommendation Phase:* An integrated summary of all fieldwork and working group investigations to be subject to further clarification at a workshop held in December 1987 for recommendations to be made for ongoing evaluation strategies.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STRATEGY

In order to implement phase one described in the 'Aims and Objectives Workshop' document (UVP, 1985) was distributed to staff and a period of about two weeks set aside for staff to digest, discuss and comment on the document whilst they were engaged in teaching in the field. This served to focus attention, in the first instance, on those aspects of education programmes that deserved ongoing attention and, secondly, on the possible 'tensions' that exist between statements of intent and what is happening out there'. Group workshop sessions were scheduled and it was envisaged that, by the end of May, the following would have taken place:

- The statements in the 'Aims and Objectives Workshop' document would have been refined in the light of observation, experience and discussion.
- A revised document containing staff descriptions of intent and statements would have been subject to close scrutiny and further revision.
- Areas that needed to be further investigated and clarified during phase two would have been identified.

Before proper written revision had been made a structural strategy for intensive fieldwork was developed. Many staff had already plunged into the field. We had little option but to adopt a 'happening' or 'let it happen' attitude. And did it happen?

The enthusiasm evident in the intensive fieldwork phase, whilst preventing the proper completion of the first phase and causing the omission of important areas of investigation in the interim, was nevertheless of immense value, generating a momentum that carried to the very heart of fieldwork. Further value of this enthusiasm was the encouragement of untried experimentation with a variety of tools and techniques as being both acceptable and desirable and gave rise to extensive staff discussion concerning critical issues.

A 'tool' that deserves particular mention is the field tape recorder. Designed to be a compact day-pack, with a clip-on microphone and a switch, it was extensively used and enabled staff to describe and analyse interactions with the field in a non-threatening and their own contrived way.

The third or 'Summary and recommendation' phase emphasised three vital problem areas:

- This phase coincided with a particularly busy period i.e. August to October. As a result, attention was difficult with deadlines stretched, discussion groups being affected by a general erosion of cohesiveness and a loss of focus.
- It became apparent that some staff lacked the skills of interviewing, devising questions and documentation. There was little time to patch up and optimise the creation of useful ideas developed.

- As the year drew to a close in December, many staff left or took leave so that the final processes of clarification, evaluation of working documents and recommendations could not be shared with or referred to the entire staff and synthesis was difficult. A 'drawing together' write-up workshop was used to establish a base for further work in 1988.

In the final analysis of the implementation, a vital point is illustrated by the blurring and drawing out of the proposed phase structure: flexibility is an essential ingredient of a participatory evaluation programme.

IMMERSION AND THE GROWTH OF AN EVALUATION ETHOS

By the end of 1987 there was a realization that we may have fallen far short of initial perceptions and the stated objectives of the programme. The working document descriptions of the purpose and significance of the Umgeni Valley Project still failed adequately to reflect some of the less obvious significances. The whole area of evaluation indicators of what takes place during the education programme had still been inadequately researched and many more problems, issues and areas of doubt emerged or remained unresolved and poorly clarified. Deadlines had not been met, resulting in a falling-behind of the schedule and the envisaged phasing had become a mire.

Did this signify that the PEP-UP had failed? By no means. What had effectively happened was that most participants had veritably wallowed in evaluation. As a result much of the documentation tended to be vague, insuccinct and inconclusive.

The most fortunate thing about the entire project was that, at least in some senses, we could afford the luxury of this immersion. Less flexible and less experimental environmental education programmes would not have benefitted, as we were able to, from the gradual assimilation of evaluation principles, techniques and benefits. Evaluation became a way of life, a part of the professional routine and, perhaps more important, had become completely non-threatening. PEP-UP sessions were welcomed as being an opportunity for sharing ideas, comparing notes, challenging ideas and having some rhetorical fun.

Fairly early in the year the slogan *It's not on top, it's inside* was coined and it certainly reflected the conviction that evaluation was in no way an imposition but an integral part of the education programme. Like the ordering of food prior to a group's arrival, it was something that was, and in some cases was not, done as a matter of course. A sense of propriety had taken root. Equally exciting and valuable was the fact that evaluation had become part of one's professional consciousness and was not only on schedules and agenda but in the current informal teatime chatter. In retrospect the author would, without hesitation, aim in the first year of any ongoing environmental education evaluation programme, to achieve little more. The writer is convinced that there can be no better guarantee of continuity.

STAFF PERCEPTIONS

In November 1987 staff were asked to critically review the 1987 programme and submit individual written reports. The following is a summary of their perceptions.

The Process

A distinct advantage to being free of time constraints was that the first year of the evaluation programme was largely one of 'immersion'. Whilst this immersion might be a luxury in one-off evaluations, it was perceived to be vital to ongoing evaluation. This is because it allows time for an ethos of evaluation to develop, for individual

barriers to evaluation to be broken down and for everyone to become involved.

The initiation of the programme led to thinking, discussion, sharing ideas and introspection which, whilst often confused, forced staff to critically examine the constituent parts of a course and enabled them better to understand expectations, feelings and failures as they became more sensitive to teaching methods. The second session (first phase) helped to clarify the objectives of evaluation but was not properly completed as it 'spilt over' and was integrated within the fieldwork phase. Fieldwork was regarded as the most valuable phase as it helped lessen the threat of observation, highlighted techniques, focussed attention on methodology and enhanced understanding of the environmental education programme as a whole.

At this stage the phasing became confused and there was no formalised interaction between fieldwork and clarification before summaries and recommendations were made. Constant feed-back and consolidation were seen to be necessary. This was impossible to achieve during busy periods so it should have been scheduled for a quieter time.

There was general acceptance that the evaluation programme increased self-awareness, which in turn led to an improved group awareness. *Attitudes and approaches to work were changed and this resulted in an improved sense of direction and purpose.* The acquisition of 'tools' for self-evaluation (e.g. tape recorder) was also seen as beneficial.

Once the process of observing and being observed were acknowledged as being essential to the evaluation process, anxiety about field observation was dissipated. Reporting also gave rise to anxiety as deadlines were threatening during busy periods, objectivity was difficult to attain and the synthesis of diverse viewpoints was sometimes problematic.

Problems

For many of the staff the 'describe and explain' emphasis of the programme was too theoretical at times. This was probably because there was no given model to build on. The diversity and complexity of the programmes mean that topics were often allocated and distributed for research not chosen by staff. The perspectives of the group as a whole were replaced by a single evaluation viewpoint that did not always reflect all relevant issues. This did not matter, however, as the working documents were designed to be the capital for further scrutiny. The synthesis of research, supervision and recording became the responsibility of two individuals and proved enormous and too time-consuming.

The high rate of staff turnover disrupted continuity and hampered progress due to the need for constant initiation. Some short term employees saw little benefit in evaluation as their stay with the project was so short, and proved difficult to motivate.

The diversity of teaching styles necessitated a diversity of evaluation techniques and it was often difficult to get all staff together frequently enough to compare notes. These ideas were useful for developing a strategy for 1988.

Staff Recommendations

It was generally felt that evaluation should be more goal-orientated with goals being subjected to constant refining, resulting in increased effectiveness and a better understanding of one's self, colleagues and the education programme. What has emerged is that this lack of given goals appears to have been important as it forced the staff to define direction out of their everyday experience.

The need for ongoing evaluation was recognised by all. Strategies suggested to ensure this included regular reporting by all staff, continuing use of appropriate equipment, the inclusion of discussion and methodology in all post-course debriefings and further research into evaluative techniques.

Suggested strategies for 1988 were to instil a need for evaluation, consolidation and report-back on the 1987 programme as well as setting new goals and a schedule for 1988. Mechanisms for continuous observation and feed-back should be instituted and should include interim consolidation, goal adjustment and the acquisition of our own equipment.

TOWARDS A STRATEGY FOR ON-GOING EVALUATION

It is not possible to develop a recipe for the evaluation of environmental education from this experience but we do have some very useful guiding principles to work from. It is possible to proceed with a definite sense of direction, greatly facilitated by directional indicators that emerged from the evaluation process during 1987. Broadly stated, these indicators suggest that any future evaluation strategy should aim to:

- Maintain a high degree of flexibility and adaptability within whatever structures are devised.
- Allow for a constant challenging, clarification and revision of what has gone before.
- Provide for the realities of 'trickle and surge' periods as well as for inevitable turnover of staff. In this regard, the annual synthesis process should be thoroughly instituted to enable continuing staff to produce a document that those leaving can rewrite and submit to an arbitrator/ editor for 'final' writing.
- Frequently re-assess evaluation goals in order to avoid rigidity and retain relevance.
- Retain the participatory nature of evaluation by including a variety of participant roles.
- Develop evaluative skills and expertise, test various tools and expand evaluative capital.

What appears necessary then, and indeed possible, is not a finite structure to be imposed upon a programme but a set of relevant guidelines and appropriate mechanisms that will assist in the attainment of these goals. As was the case with the indicators outlined above, some useful mechanisms have emerged concurrently with, or as a result of, PEP-UP and are already functioning or have been planned for. The most important of these mechanisms are:

- *Research opportunities:* Planning of the 1988 staff development programme includes the introduction of research seminars. A prioritised list of topics makes provision for both immersive and strategic research.
- *Evaluation steering committee:* In order to assist with the facilitating (actualising) and co-ordinating (formalising) functions, an informal committee consisting of an immersion co-ordinator, research administrator and editor/arbitrator has been appointed.
- *Quarterly planning workshops:* These will coincide loosely with envisaged evaluation phases for 1988 and should facilitate more regular reporting, discussion, negotiation and tasking.
- *Teacher involvement:* The improved communication with teachers that should result from the introduction of pre and post-course packages will make it easier to involve teachers in the evaluation process.

- *Maintenance of descriptive working documents:* A precedent of continuous updating has been firmly established in 1988 and should continue, considerably helped by the use of the word processor.
- *Consultant comment on reports and working documents,* participation in annual strategy workshops and review of research papers.

Administrative Ideas to Facilitate Evaluation

In addition to these evolutionary indicators and mechanisms, a number of procedures need to be considered early in 1988:

- A multi-phase approach needs to be adopted. This should cater for immersion, strategic evaluation, clarification and annual synthesis.
- To prevent the diversity of focusses from leading to incohesiveness, there needs to be a co-ordinated focus of all staff on a single theme whenever convenient.
- The collection and cataloguing of articles and reference works on evaluation research and learning processes needs to be formalised.
- Two useful models have recently come to hand and, with this description, will be used as the basis of a staff evaluation workshop. The eight-phase procedure outlined by Cohen and Manion (1985) will be considered, as will a model presented by Peter Buckland of the University of Bophuthatswana at an evaluation workshop at Pilanesberg National Park in November 1987.

As has already been stated, the above is not a strategy. To retain the participatory nature of the evaluation process, a strategic model will not be designed and imposed, but will be formulated at a staff workshop early in 1988.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

At the beginning of 1987 Rob O'Donoghue gave me a quote from T.S. Elliot's *Little Gidding*:

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started ...*

How profoundly true this proved to be of the PEP-UP process - and what an enriching journey of exploration it turned out to be! My very sincere thanks to Rob for his nurturing and to my staff for their tolerance and enthusiasm.

REFERENCES

- COHEN L. & MANION L. 1985: *Research Methods in Education*. 2nd ed. Croom Helm. London.
- IRWIN P.R. 1986: Letter to the President of the Wildlife Society of Southern Africa 8/8/1986.
- ODENDAAL A. 1987: Goal management as an attempt to evaluate nature conservation campaigns. *Southern African Journal of Environmental Education*. No. 3 November.
- O'DONOGHUE R. 1987: Environmental Education and Evaluation; an eleventh hour reconciliation. *Southern African Journal of Environmental Education*. No. 3 November.
- RODGER I.A. & RICHARDSON J.A.S. 1985: *Self-evaluation for Primary Schools*. Hodder & Stoughton. London.
- UVP 1985: *Aims and objectives*. Internal Document. Umgeni Valley Project.