

# ASSESSING READINESS FOR COMMUNITY-ENGAGED EVALUATION | BRINGING A LITTLE T.L.C. TO YOUR EVALUATION PRACTICE

*PAMELA TEITELBAUM*

Preparing to apply participatory methodology is often a crucial first step to a more inclusive evaluation design and implementation process. A few key tools can help you to assess existing capacity and levels of readiness to do engaged evaluation. One important value is that they will help you to better understand the degree of importance and feasibility that the criteria of transparency, learning and consent (T.L.C) has in building this context. The hope is that these tools offer ways to prepare the terrain for doing community-engaged evaluation work.

## PARTICIPATORY METHODOLOGY IN EVALUATION - IN CONTEXT

Evaluation, like other practice areas, is constantly changing and responding to needs of those engaging in the practice. Practitioners are being asked by funders and community changemakers to lead or deliver quality evaluation processes with the aim of supporting, growing, and scaling their interventions<sup>1</sup> to improve and strengthen the places we live, the systems we're a part of, or find ways to remove the barriers that affect our lives.

Traditional evaluation processes have generally been more concerned about the transactions,

---

<sup>1</sup>Although the word *intervention* does seem a bit clinical, I do find that it is an all-encompassing term to mean the subject of the evaluation. I'm using the term intervention to describe the focus of an evaluation. The term for the purpose of this paper, refers to all the different types of community change and systems change efforts that may be evaluated using these criteria, such as a project, program, policy, strategy, thematic area, technical support, an institution, funding body, tool, or other activity. It includes discreet activities, organizational programs, collaborative efforts, collective impact strategies, network building to name a few. The criteria can be used to evaluate 'grassroots' local activities, community-based, municipal, provincial, regional, national and international levels.

rather than the interactions<sup>2</sup>; however, in working closely with community changemakers – from donors to community workers - I can attest to a marked shift in interest towards further embracing practices that acknowledge the complexities that exist within the contexts of changemaking. With this acknowledgement comes the need to establish practices that strengthen relationships, build trust and work towards sustained engagement of community stakeholders.

The acceptance of mixed methods processes (relying on quantitative and qualitative data) is more welcomed by donors and funding agencies seeking to gather evidence about *how* impact is happening, not just *what* and *why* it's happening. This is important in order to strategically learn how to scale these successes more broadly across different contexts and communities. Certain sectors are definitely more progressive than others, when it comes to relying on relationships as a key factor in achieving successful implementation of evaluation work at the community level. "

“ Evaluators are redefining and revisiting existing principles and criteria, and exploring new methodology that redefine ways of doing this work to respond to expressed curiosities and needs. ”

To get to this level of engaging communities successfully in evaluation, evaluators are redefining and revisiting existing principles and criteria, and exploring tools that support methodology helping to redefine *ways of doing* this work and respond to the expressed curiosities and needs of organizations, and the stakeholders and communities they're working with in constantly shifting contexts.

How better to do this than to cultivate an environment that infuses in its dialogue and planning an understanding about its own capacity and ability to ensure **transparency, learning and consent** as an integrated part of the practice.

This paper is the product of a deep interest and experience employing participatory methodology in doing evaluation work. It offers a framework for sharing knowledge about the participatory evaluation landscape, supporting literacy about the participatory field and ways of engaging that can help prepare the community change terrain for a healthy planning and implementation process of community-engaged practice. Also covered in this paper are some tools that support processes for critical reflection among those wishing to do evaluation that engages stakeholders and community members in a meaningful way.

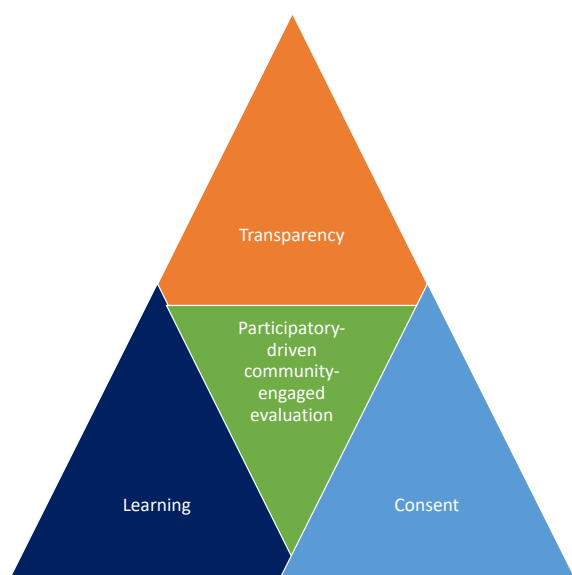
---

<sup>2</sup> Charles H. Green, & Andrea P. Howe. (2012). *The Trusted Advisor Fieldbook: A Comprehensive Toolkit for Leading with Trust*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

## A MOVE TO COMMUNITY-ENGAGED<sup>3</sup> EVALUATION

If we chronicled the evaluation field, we'd see that over the last four decades evaluation practice is continuously shifting. It is considered to be “not a prescriptive field” and that the theory of evaluation is relatively responsive “grown out of the use of evaluation in practice”<sup>4</sup>. Community-based evaluation and participatory research is exciting in that it brought the experience into the community rather than remain outside the periphery as a strictly observational practice. As a result, we've had to consider how to do this well; therefore, needing to consider the preparations for planning and design. Ultimately, this means needing to consider the pre-evaluation planning context as intentionally and the evaluation implementation itself. The value in this is the ability to take a moment and consider the human element – the relationships necessary in all of this work and the recognition that transparency, learning and consent are important to establishing a long-term interactive exchange between the evaluators and the community stakeholders and members.

As suggested earlier, this new framework offered in this paper establishes a framework that presents a set of criteria that I've spent time reflecting on and exploring with other evaluation professionals and community changemakers through discussions and webinars, and in practice during workshops.



## LAYING THE FOUNDATION TO INTRODUCING T.L.C. FRAMEWORK TO PLAN FOR THE DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF A COMMUNITY-ENGAGED EVALUATION PROCESS

### WHAT IS IT?

This framework is meant to support the development of participatory-driven, community-engaged evaluation development. Where transparency, learning, and consent are foundational criteria to lead and strengthen community-engaged assessment practices and strategic learning opportunities.

<sup>3</sup> “Community Engagement is the process by which citizens are engaged to work and learn together on behalf of their communities to create and realize bold visions for the future. Community Engagement can involve informing citizens about your initiative, inviting their input, collaborating with them to generate solutions, and partnering with the community from the beginning to tackle community issues. Community Engagement increases community cohesion and allows for the community to have ownership over the outcomes that will ultimately impact them.” Taken from Tamarack’s website at: <https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/communityengagement>

<sup>4</sup> Fred Carden, & Marvin C. Alkin. (n.d.). Carden, F., & Alkin, M. (2012). Evaluation Roots: An International Perspective. *Journal Of MultiDisciplinary Evaluation*, 8(17), 102–118.

### WHAT ARE THE BASIC PRINCIPLES?

Central to the T.L.C. framework is the notion that evaluation in communities relies on healthy and sustainable relationships among community actors and stakeholders that can then lead to transformative social change. There are several principles of the T.L.C framework that are highly complementary to designing participatory practices aligned with existing frameworks that can optimize the community-engaged evaluation experience contributing to transformative change in addition to producing high quality evidence of results.

Principles supporting T.L.C. <sup>5</sup>	
Inclusivity	Equality
Intersectionality	Culturally-responsive
Respect	Relationships first
Accessibility	Improvement
Equitability	Learning
Participant-focused	Community knowledge
Involvement	Sustainability
Capacity building	Innovation
Work with humility	Build trust
Establish mutual respect	

As a result of the positive feedback and considerable interest, I believe this new **T.L.C framework** will help community organizations enrich their community-based evaluation space if adopted. This framework will be helpful in constructing a foundation for a sustainable landscape for participation in community-based assessment initiatives that establishes as its central component a set of principles, such as inclusion and respect to name a few.

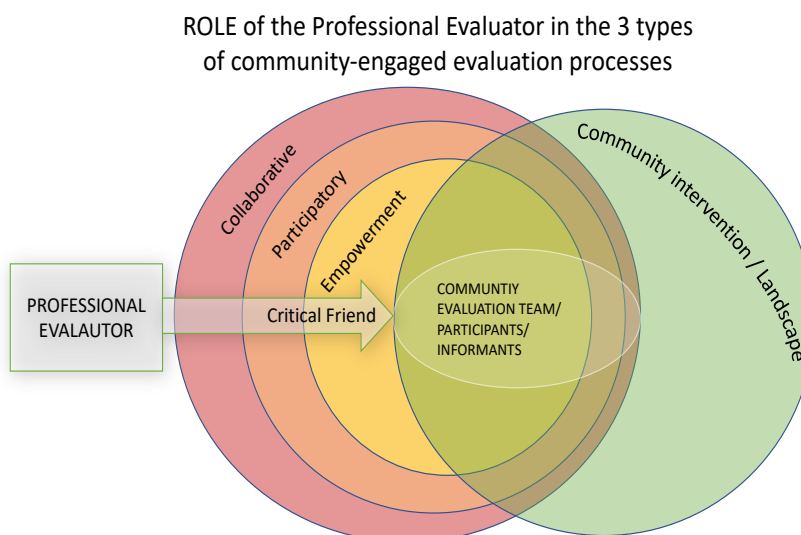
So before adding the **T.L.C theory** to community-engaged evaluation, it is helpful to:

- 1) Learn a bit about the distinctions between a variety of stakeholder-engaged evaluation processes;
- 2) Do a quick assessment of how engaged your evaluation practice is currently, and;
- 3) Help to establish how then are you able to further prepare the landscape to make it ready for community-engaged evaluation experiences by using the **T.L.C tool** to better understand the community-engaged evaluation terrain, and what the level of readiness there is to adopt this type of evaluation work into your community work.

---

<sup>5</sup> Some of these principles are borrowed and are complementary to the principles laid out in my colleague Lisa Attygalle's paper entitled Understanding Community-Led Approaches to Community Change: <https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/library/paper-understanding-community-led-approaches-community-change-lisa-attygalle>

## 1) WHAT DISTINGUISHES AN EVALUATION AS COLLABORATIVE, PARTICIPATORY, OR EMPOWERING?



According to David Fetterman, in his book entitled Collaborative, Participatory, and Empowerment Evaluation: Stakeholder involvement approaches (2020), there are distinguishing foundational principles and varying levels of involvement for evaluators that help us understand the degree to which an evaluation process is considered collaborative, participatory or empowering. A key difference between these evaluation types is the role that the evaluator plays in the overall process of conducting the evaluation. The brief descriptions below help us understand the characteristics.

### Collaborative

This type of evaluation may be more typical, and closest to its conventional cousin. The professional evaluator is given the lead role in conducting the evaluation. Key stakeholders will be asked to participate and provide support for implementation, but the professional evaluator is directly accountable for successfully rolling things out. Final decisions about planning, design, implementation and reporting are all left to them with the support and input of collaboration members (CMs) which can include a range of stakeholders from program staff, to community intervention team and participants<sup>6</sup>.

### Participatory

In this this type of process roles between evaluator and the evaluation team is more balanced, with the professional evaluator and stakeholders sharing responsibility for conducting the evaluation. In this scenario an evaluation team may be comprised of a range of stakeholders from program staff to managers and organizational leaders. Together with an evaluator, they are leading and controlling a

<sup>6</sup> Fetterman, D. M., Rodríguez-Campos, L., & Zukoski, A. P. (2018). Collaborative, Participatory, and Empowerment Evaluation: Stakeholder Involvement Approaches. The Guilford Press. P. 18

shared process for decision-making, planning, design, implementation and reporting. Generally, in this situation, planners of the intervention and the participants are actively engaging with the evaluator to implement the evaluation process ranging from the design all the way to the sharing of evidence and reporting.

### ***Empowerment***

Process is characterized by its focus on strategic learning and capacity building of community stakeholders in doing evaluation. Empowerment evaluation focuses on fostering sustainability, where findings and process are often means to encouraging and moving communities or groups to self-determination. The role of the evaluator in this scenario is commonly observed as less directly involved in all facets of the evaluation cycle from planning to reporting. Working side by side with the program staff or community intervention implementing team. According to Fetterman, the professional evaluator engaged needs to be engaged for their strong skills in listening, engaging in critical discourse, and improving the evaluation practice of the community stakeholders leading the evaluation experience. Referred to as the ‘critical friend’ or evaluation advisor – they are engaged to “facilitate the process and steps of an empowerment evaluation...raising many of the difficult questions, and as appropriate, tells the hard truths in a diplomatic fashion.”<sup>7</sup>

### ***No One Right Answer...***

When considering all three of these evaluation types, it is clear that there is no one right answer, and knowing when to embark on an evaluation process that engaged the community in different ways and at different times requires a good level of ‘self-awareness’ or community-awareness as an organization or collaborative to decide on the best process for the context and situation where an evaluation is going to take place. Several factors need to be considered from available resources, current levels of expertise, and ability to strengthen capacity to name a few. With this, a key element of this is also vital to making these decisions, and that is related to the existing relationships within the community context that exist to support or hinder the evaluation process.

**Using the T.L.C. Framework** offers a clear set of criteria with intentional and intrinsic value to improve and strengthen community-based engagement practices as a sustainable part of the evaluation, from conceptualization to implementation. It can help make room for decision-makers, leaders, and community members to critically reflect on the existing context and determine their level of readiness for community-engaged evaluation. It is meant to complement existing discussions, and support planning and decision-making processes.

The framework is built around a few key elements that help us:

- Pay attention to where we are at within our own context
- Know what our relationships are like within the community we are doing evaluation
- Know what types of evaluations are possible
- Determine the role that an evaluator can play.

---

<sup>7</sup> David Fetterman, Shakeh J Kaferian, & Abraham Wandersman (Eds.). (n.d.). Empowerment Evaluation (Second edition). SAGE Publications. P. 29

As we identify and define these particular elements, we are then ready to consider the degree of importance and feasibility we can consider when deciding how to approach areas of transparency, learning and consent as we embark on the planning of the community-engaged evaluation process. This is directly tied to intentionally deciding on not only what role an evaluator might have, but as well the level of engagement desired, and the quality of the relationships required to conduct the evaluation. This can be used reflectively both in looking at where we are at in the present, and in looking forward.

## 2) HOW COMMUNITY-ENGAGED IS YOUR EVALUATION CULTURE AND PROCESSES?

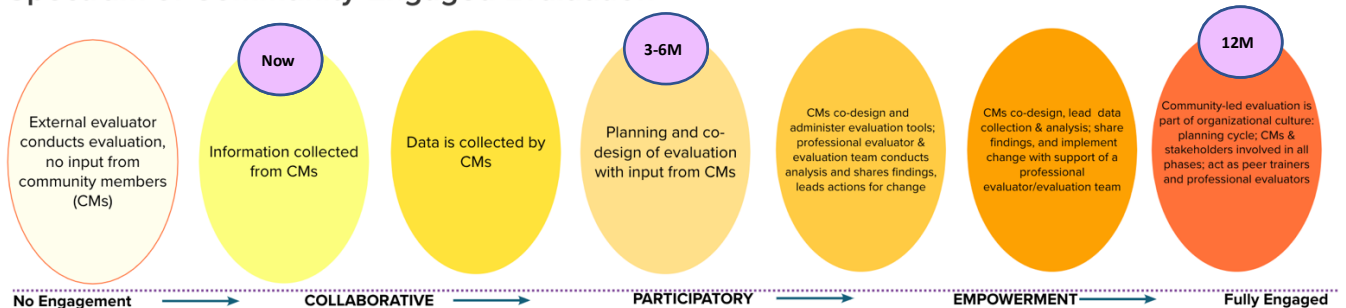
To answer this question, a few key tools can support the pre-planning of the evaluation experience. First, it is useful to look at where things are currently in terms of employing a community-engaged evaluation practice. Second, introducing T.L.C. into the practice will further establish a healthy, and sustainable foundation for conceptualizing and conducting community-engaged evaluation by again reflecting on how feasible and important it is to apply transparency, learning and consent criteria to this work.

### Where Do You Land on The Spectrum? Now? Later?

Now that you're familiar with the community-engaged evaluation landscape and have a sense of the direction you might be heading in your decisions around the type of evaluation process right for your context, it's time to start assessing your readiness by first contemplating where you are at now with your practice.

The spectrum below was inspired by a recent Tamarack-led webinar with guest presenters from [YouthREX](#) and the [MLSE LaunchPad \(MLSE\)](#), two dynamic youth-led organizations based in Ontario, Canada. This spectrum was originally focused on youth-engaged evaluation processes and has been adapted into a reflective tool to assess and understand the spectrum of engaged evaluation practices that can take place at the community level with multiple stakeholders. It can be helpful to facilitate the discussions discerning how engaged your evaluation practice is and support decisions about where you would like to see it land.

### Spectrum of Community-Engaged Evaluation



Spectrum above is presented with example of pink sticky note examples – would normally begin without the time markers.

The spectrum above ranges from 'no engagement' to 'fully engaged' with several options in between that signify the level of engagement your currently able to accomplish and can help you think through the feasibility and capacity your organization has to plan and implement one of the three types of evaluation processes highlighted in the spectrum itself.



For instance, early in this conversation, it might help to demonstrate that your organization or collaborative is able to consider employing an empowerment approach, or that your context is more suitable to adopt a collaborative process. You'll know more once you work through Step 2, and then be able to make decisions based on a broader understanding of the context. An approach for using the engagement spectrum above is to engage the stakeholders and community members (CMs) in a discussion about the current status of evaluation engagement.

A suggested question helpful to launch this conversation using the spectrum is to consider:

*To what extent your organization or collaborative is **currently** employ stakeholder/community-engaged evaluation practices?*

**This same question can be asked 3 to 6-months later and then as well a year later to assess if your organization or collaborative has moved further along the spectrum.** A good tracking option is to simply add sticky-notes to the discussion. Where diverging opinions exist, good conversations can help to bring everyone at the table 'on the same page' and help you to determine the steps needed to move further along the spectrum.

### **3) ADDING T.L.C INTO OUR COMMUNITY-ENGAGED EVALUATION PLANNING**

Once we understand where we are and where we want to be, we then move on to preparing the terrain for community-engaged evaluation pre-planning by asking ourselves **why do we want to plan this type of evaluation experience? What value will it add?** Asking these questions helps guide the collective inquiry prior to embarking on the evaluation planning itself. There are several reasons to do evaluation that engages stakeholders and community members ranging from relationship building to follow up actions – determining which need to be prioritized within your context throughout the evaluation experience is useful.

By engaging in these reflective processes with the key stakeholders and members of the community from the beginning, the value in the evaluation is not only centered around its findings but its process too. The following question with examples of areas to focus the critical inquiry is useful to begin understanding what value a more participatory approach to evaluation would bring to your community - **Why introduce community-engaged evaluation to assess your community intervention? What value will it add?**

- *To build relationships?*
- *To build capacity/awareness of community?*
- *To engage community members in local actions?*
- *To establish greater accountability and transparency?*

In further establishing an understanding about the why and what for? The T.L.C criteria are critical when thinking about how to do community-engaged evaluation practice. As a practitioner primarily applying a lens of participation and collaboration to all of the evaluation work I do, I've found that the connections between evaluation and engagement are essential if we want to contribute to community change. This interplay has shown to be a contributing factor to transformative social change in and of themselves.



## How Are We Doing Evaluation? What Are We Hoping to Achieve?

We can observe that community-engaged evaluation can lead to new learning, strategies, shifts in thinking, and the *'doing of the work'*, as well how it contributes to evidence of impact. However even more so, it promotes an environment that support the assessment of the impact of the work and the experiences of the community and contributions to change itself. These types of processes are enriched by the T.L.C. framework as criteria that help to develop a type of evaluation *'intimacy'*, which is capable of achieving high levels of ownership of the evidence of outcomes, as well as of the process itself among stakeholders and community members. It also is instrumental in building community capacity to do evaluation, which can lead to a more empowered experience.

In conventional evaluation processes where there isn't any engagement of community in the process, it can elicit a jarring reaction from communities when external evaluators come into the community asking a lot of questions.

In response to this longtime experience, as evaluators and community changemakers we have to ask ourselves how central to evaluation is relationship-building? Community-engaged evaluation models show that a strong commitment for developing and building strong relationships, whether on a discreet organizational project, or a multi-sector, collaborative required from communities to be able to successfully plan, implement and do evaluation.

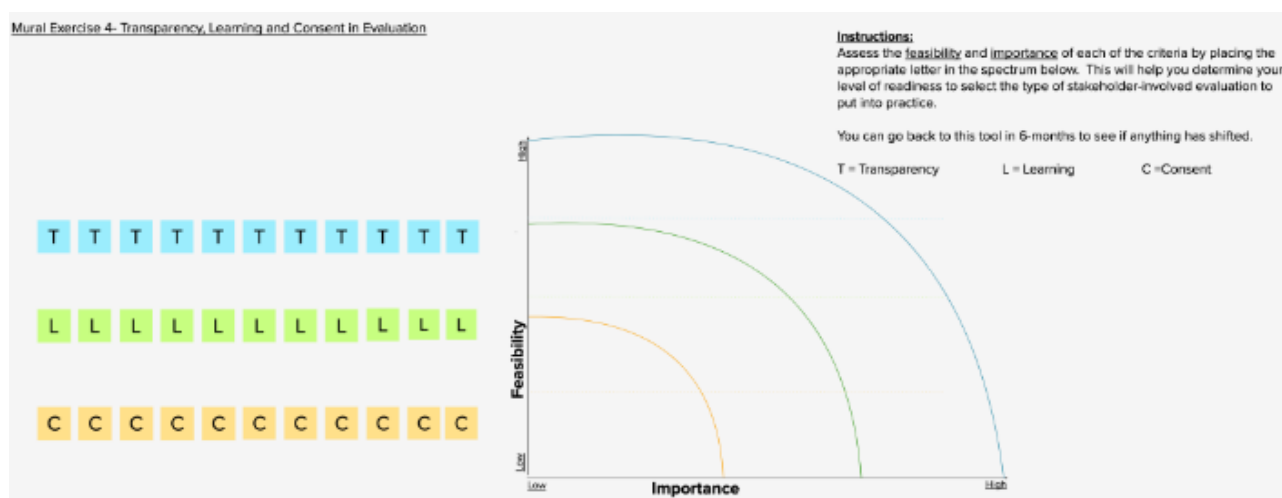
Whether we rely on a diverse set of actors at different stages of the evaluation, or specific stages where the specific types of involvement are taking place, employing the T.L.C. criteria helps us critically reflect on the level engagement that might be feasible and important at a particular stage. The important questions that help guide these reflections are:

- How do we want to be transparent?
- What level of learning do we want to accomplish?
- What type and level of consent is necessary to maintain quality and genuine engagement that is a part of the relationship building and sustaining experience?

Evaluation in communities relies on relationships among community actors and stakeholders that can then lead to transformative social change. When we think about the degree of transparency or learning and consent that we have to consider in planning how we will conduct the evaluation, and the level of engagement important to our evaluation work we are doing.



Recently in a workshop we designed and facilitated at Tamarack, we were able to test out the T.L.C. criteria using the Spectrum shown below (blank spectrum). In MURAL<sup>8</sup>, workshop participants were asked to reflect on the degree of importance, and level of feasibility they're organizations currently had to prioritize transparency, learning and consent in the planning of their evaluation work by placing virtual sticky notes marked with a T=transparency, a L=learning, and a C=consent on the spectrum board to indicate their responses and then discuss the rationale with the members in their small groups. Discussions needed to consider not only feasibility and priority but as well consider the current resources allocated to the evaluation of their interventions and the capacity they had.

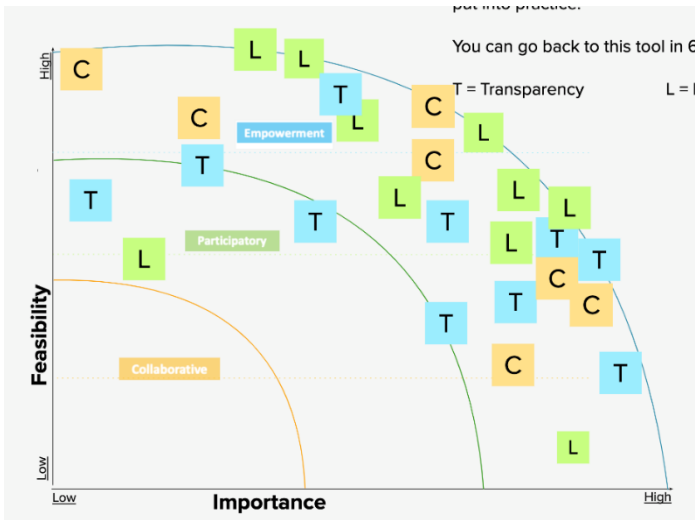


The results were quite telling (see image next page). The goal of this process was to help them better understand their level of readiness to embark upon meaningful community-engaged evaluation process and helped them to see where on the spectrum they landed and where they may want to do additional preparations if they were to choose to implement a process that was collaborative, participatory or empowering. It was considered to be a useful reflection and a new tool to support planning, as demonstrated by one participants' feedback from the workshop evaluation "The piece about TLC was new and prompted new perspective on participatory evaluation."

In thinking further about community-engaged evaluation in practice, a critical aspect is to further understand the extent to which **transparency** plays a role in strengthening the participatory approach to an evaluative process. Depending on the context, transparency in community-engaged evaluation is influential to the level of trust-building and honesty.

Within community change work, degrees of transparency vary based on context, issues being addressed, sectors and participants. Further, transparency can influence the level of commitment and accountability among community actors and is essential to ensuring an approach that adheres to meaningful cultural responsibility and shared power dynamics in community.

<sup>8</sup> Mural is a virtual whiteboard platform used to conduct virtual meetings and learning events. [www.mural.co](http://www.mural.co)



By looking at these different elements involved in transparent approach, we may see that **transparency** in one context may not be the same as in another. For example, where the focus of a community intervention is on addressing gender-based violence among young girls in a community, decisions about transparency and the boundaries we set around it will be highly influenced by this factor.

When we take into consideration the degree to **learning** as a central criterion to our evaluation process, we want to think about how learning in an evaluation process

strengthen our work? As well as consider who might benefit most from the learning about these processes and outcomes that can lead to specific actions to create further community change. Knowing what capacity building is needed and where relationships need to be strengthened in the community to achieve success are essential to a successful community-engaged evaluation experience.

Finally, when thinking about **consent**, an essential factor when planning to engage community members, actors, stakeholders in the data gathering, analysis and sharing of results. There needs to be prioritized consideration given to ethical practice. No matter at what stage of the engaged evaluation and in particular around data ownership. For example, when speaking about evaluation experiences in diverse or culturally sensitive communities or in Indigenous communities, data ownership is a fundamental part of the dialogue in planning the evaluation.

## MAIN TAKEAWAYS

In applying the steps to better understand our current engagement approach to our evaluation practice, and assessing the degree to which we are able to feasibly prioritize transparency, learning and consent in preparing the evaluation terrain in our communities, our main takeaways are to ensure that:

- Transparency leads to trust-building among community members
- Learning can lead to stronger and more committed actions among community members
- Consent ultimately leads to a continuous community engagement process that evolves into an equitable empowerment process for the community.

## ABOUT PAMELA TEITELBAUM

Pamela is a Consulting Director of the Tamarack Institute's Evaluating Impact Practice Area. She is passionate about supporting and facilitating an interplay of learning and evaluation that creates transformative experiences aimed at developing healthy, equitable, gender-responsive and rights-based communities.

Pamela believes that increasing access and awareness about evaluation strategies, methodologies and processes leads to more critical, collaborative and long-term community change. By increasing capacity of communities to engage in and employ strategically-designed evaluation and learning practices, more possibilities are created for stakeholders and beneficiaries to experience the value of



community changes and how they lead to effective, efficient and impactful outcomes.

In 2010, Pamela founded a consulting company specializing in evaluating and supporting capacity building, educational design, training, monitoring and evaluation, social policy research and community engagement. With over 20 years of experience designing and facilitating training, leading social policy research and evaluation processes, she has worked extensively within the international and Canadian NGO sector in the fields of international human rights education, gender equality, and community development.

Funded by the Government of Canada's Social Development Partnership Program.

**Canada**

The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.

## REFERENCES

- Attygalle, Lisa (2020) Understanding Community-Led Approaches to Community Change <https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/library/paper-understanding-community-led-approaches-community-change-lisa-attygalle>
- Charles H. Green, & Andrea P. Howe. (2012). *The Trusted Advisor Fieldbook: A Comprehensive Toolkit for Leading with Trust*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Carden, F. & Alkin, M.C. (n.d.). Carden, F., & Alkin, M. (2012). Evaluation Roots: An International Perspective. *Journal Of MultiDisciplinary Evaluation*, 8(17), 102–118.
- Chouinard, JA., & Cram, F. (2020). *Culturally Responsive Approaches to Evaluation*. SAGE Publications.
- Fetterman, D. M., Rodríguez-Campos, L., & Zukoski, A. P. (2018). *Collaborative, Participatory, and Empowerment Evaluation: Stakeholder Involvement Approaches*. The Guilford Press.
- Fetterman, D.M., Kafterian, S.J., & Wandersman A. (Eds.). (n.d.). *Empowerment Evaluation (Second edition)*. SAGE Publications.
- Worthen, M., Veale, A., McKay, S., & Wessells, M. (2019). The transformative and emancipatory potential of participatory evaluation: Reflections from a participatory action research study with war-affected young mothers. *Oxford Development Studies*, 47(2), 154–170. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600818.2019.1584282>