Learning for effective teaching
participate in professional learning communities and networks

The most significant change (MSC) approach to evaluation

What is it?

The MSC approach to evaluation is a participatory qualitative data collection process which uses stories to identify the impact of the intervention i.e. Learning to Learn. Participants are invited to write stories of ‘significant change’ and then participate in dialogue (within a group) about them, to make explicit what individuals and the wider group value as significant change.

In writing the stories, participants are asked to write about:

- What happened?
- Why do you think this is a significant change?

Participants share their stories with others, and ‘domains of change’ are established. These are loose categories of change used to distinguish different types of stories. Participants are then involved in discussing the stories in each domain and in doing so, become clearer about what they, and others, value as significant change. A selection process can be established, whereby the ‘most significant change’ story in each domain is selected. In this process, participants make evaluative judgements and the criteria that people are using to interpret each story become transparent. Stories can then be collected and a secondary analysis can be conducted, to provide further insights.

Why are we using it?

The aims of the process are:

- For project stakeholders to develop a better understanding of what is occurring for participants involved in the project
- For participants to explore and share their various values and preferences in identifying significant change
- For participants and stakeholders to gain a clearer understanding of what is and what is not being achieved by the project and to clarify what they are really trying to achieve, so that the project can move towards what is desirable and move away from what is undesirable.

In regard to Learning to Learn, we see the process as an enabling one to:

- Provide space for participants to reflect on and make sense of the complex changes;
- Promote learning about what is valued as change by individuals and organisations involved in the Learning to Learn project; collect data about the impact of the project as a whole - data which captures ‘thick description’ and complexity that accompanies change.

Elements of a powerful story of change

- Narrative (not a report or list of dot points)
- Shorter rather than longer
- Simple language – no jargon
- Dated
- Makes a personal connection with reader
- Focuses on a specific ‘moment/individual within the big picture
- Honest/sincere tone
- High degree of reflection and personal insights demonstrated (e.g. thinking 'out loud'; internalized and adapted what seen or heard; “I” not “we”; self declaration of the changes as a result of own learning; able to explain why)
- Includes some of the challenges/struggles/dilemmas and grappling with thinking
- Includes context and/or examples for bridge to make personal meaning
- Focuses on an issue and a resolution or a ‘before and after’ contrast
- Demonstrates writer’s values
- Implications for action/changes in practice
- Authentic/persuasive evidence of improved learning
- Use of metaphors (e.g. tree, free range chickens)
- Multiple perspectives – includes student voice (or possibility to juxtapose student’s and teacher’s versions)
- An appropriate/catchy title (but not so that it trivializes the story).