

Positivist approach assumptions in evaluation and fundamentals of an interpretational approach.

The general lack of epistemological awareness that appears to characterise prevailing approaches in the evaluation of impact has led us to analytically reconstruct those implicit theories which seem to underpin the most widespread evaluation practices, and render explicit – both in a contrary manner and in parallel - the general reference theories for the approach which we intend to adopt. The implicit conceptions, precisely due to the fact that they are such, constitute cultural premises, in an anthropological sense, of explicit discourses and international practices. For this reason, our analysis is characterised by a specific awareness of the cultural dimension of processes and phenomena, both those studied (the impacts of training) and those examined in research (both our own and that which preceded us), and therefore “ethnographically oriented”.

Three fundamental conceptions have been considered: a) the conception of reality and knowledge, b) the conception of change, c) the conception of learning.

Conceptions of reality and knowledge

The conception of reality and knowledge which inspires prevailing approaches is generally and fundamentally positivist: the natural and social world has its objective existence and is governed by universal laws that can be “discovered” by independent and disinterested observers. The researcher must concentrate on the facts, formulate hypotheses on the relations of cause/effect and verify them empirically. This epistemology, and the quantitative methods which it privileges, in our opinion, does not make it possible to fully appreciate the nature of the phenomenon we are interested in studying: to evaluate the impact of training means studying which *processes* have been activated in a socio-cultural context in relation to or during or following a training event, and it is not possible to reconstruct a socio-cultural context and its change without investigating the *meaning* which the researcher and the actors subjectively attribute to the context and the event.

Our “research question” (as well as being, probably, our personal inclination⁴) has naturally led us to assume a reference paradigm that considers reality to be a social construct whose meaning can only be grasped, as it evolves, through an holistic and interpretational approach. An holistic and interpretational approach a) leads one to re-evaluate the importance of *local* knowledge with respect to presumed *universal* knowledge, b) uses essentially *qualitative* research methods, c) starting from an awareness that training is a cultural intervention on a cultural context, it seeks to convert evaluative research into what is essentially *ethnographic* research, focusing on an appreciation of cultural and process dynamics rather than structural data.

Conceptions of change

The impact of any event, and in particular the impact of an intentional action (the change which it has “generated”) can be either foreseen, expected – and therefore “programmed” – or unforeseen. When we start to evaluate the effects of an action, or a system of actions – a policy, a training programme, an investment – our attitude and our methodological choices also depend on the theories of individual and social change to which we, usually unconsciously, refer. Such theories include specific conceptions relative, on the one hand, to the diffusion of knowledge and innovations, and on the other, to the relationship existing between ideas and behaviour, decisions and their execution.

The most widespread evaluation practices implicitly refer to a theory of “programmable change”, based on the assumption that decisions can be faithfully translated (given the actors’ intention to achieve the same) into concrete behaviour, and behaviour can reflect ideas and materialise desires and predictions. This conviction is based on a distinction that runs through a major part of western thought: the soul/body dichotomy, and the idea that the soul is the seat of

thought and ideas, whereas the body is the instrument of action⁵. The soul/body model leads, in the construction of social order, to a division of work between those who think and those who do, between those who decide and those who carry out orders. This separation of thought and action, and the subordination of the second to the first, has been among the most important rationalisation criteria – for production but also, more generally speaking, for social life – in modern societies.

Such conceptions - with Taylor being their most well-known theoriser and mass production their most visible embodiment - have become part of the implicit cultural assumptions (i.e. “common sense”) observable in western societies. Conceptions which can be related to another idea that is just as rooted in our culture i.e. that knowledge (knowing) is fundamentally intellectual, together with the parallel tendency to undervalue the role of “tacit” or sensorial knowledge – which is a prerogative of the “body” and eludes control on the part of the mind.

And yet this hypothesis of coherence and sequentiality between ideas and actions is constantly contradicted by experience: actors and groups make aware choices and formulate specific programmes of change, yet these programmes, when translated into actions, display an infinity of unexpected consequences and unwanted or contro-intuitive results. The general view taken, however, is that the outcome would have been more in line with expectations if only the programme had been more analytic or the control “in phase” more rigorous, and all demands or attempts are made such that the unwanted effects are eliminated in the subsequent approach. The adoption of a theory of “programmable change” induces the evaluator to measure the impact of an event with respect to the rational model of sequential causality incorporated in the design of the event, to verify whether what actually happened was in line with what was intended to happen, reserving reduced or zero level attention for those consequences which were not hypothesised by the model.

More problematic conceptions of social change and the relationship between ideas and behaviour (such as the *actor-network theory*), to which we have made particular reference, lead one to consider that any input intended to obtain an outcome is systematically “transferred” by the actors. In the view of Latour⁶ “... the propagation in time and space of anything – claims, orders, artefacts, assets – is in the hands of individuals; each of them can act in different ways: they can neglect, modify, deviate or betray what they have been assigned, or even add something or appropriate it for themselves”. In such cases the change is conceived as “transferral”; to transfer, in this context, also means to translate but in addition it conveys the notion of transport and modification, creating links which did not previously exist and which modify both those who transfer and that which is transferred, within a heterogeneous network of human and technological components, of relations between human beings and ideas, ideas and objects, behaviour and objects. The conception of change as transfer within a heterogeneous network of human and technological components, and the awareness of unpredictability, arbitrariness, randomness, irrationality in the translation processes, induces the evaluator to focus at least as much attention on the unexpected effects as that focused on the expected effects, conserving an attitude of genuine curiosity in relation to the phenomena studied and avoiding constructing rigid analytic grills that make it possible to assimilate only some elements – and at times not the most important – within the real processes. The distinction between expected effects and unexpected⁷ effects constitutes the first axis of the theoretical matrix which we have proposed.

Conceptions of learning

In current models and evaluation practices, the implicit theory of “programmable change” is combined with a cognitionalist and functionalist conception of learning. This conception leads one to consider learning as an intentional, tendentially systematic, problem driven process – i.e. caused by the need to resolve a problem. The implicit model is a feedback model: the participant is exposed to significant examples (new ways of seeing and doing), comparing them with the desired results, drawing conclusions from the comparison between them, and these

conclusions influence his ability to resolve the problem, his future behaviour. Learning is an exquisitely individual phenomenon, and to learn for the most part means processing information that modifies cognitive structure. To evaluate learning means measuring the modifications which have occurred within the cognitive structure of individual subjects.

A cognitionalist and functionalist conception of learning can today⁸ be countered by a vision of learning as a socio-cultural phenomenon, enriched by non-intentional and non-instrumental aspects and elements, a vision that emphasises the importance of social experiences and the tacit knowledge that they incorporate. Learning is not a way of knowing the world but a way of becoming part of a social world, of a “community of practices”⁹, professional or organisational, in relation to which there is a progressive sharing – and unconscious assimilation – of customs, identity, a symbolic universe i.e. a system of meanings that makes it possible to make sense of experience. This vision of learning emphasises, on the one hand, not so much the mind of the individual as the participatory and interactive context within which the individual learns, including “unintentionally”; and on the other, it emphasises the symbolic rather than factual consequences of training, the fact that it can generate not only technical competences or the acquisition of notions, but also various visions of role and reality.

The second axis of our matrix refers to the substantial/factual or symbolic/cultural nature of the effects of the intervention. This distinction – more problematic and subtle than the preceding one but just as important – was especially used in evaluating the effects of public programmes and policies¹⁰. The basic thesis is that each action can have substantial, factual, pragmatic results, which are potentially tangible and measurable in an objective manner, and symbolic results, which can be evaluated on the basis of perceptions, feelings, values.

It can be argued that, if an actor is satisfied with an intervention which can be defined as “symbolic”, that intervention has real importance for the actor, and cannot be distinguished from any other type of result; and it is also important to emphasise that a symbolic result (for example, the modification of the sense attributed to an event) can over time have substantial consequences and significantly influence behaviour. However, the two levels of analysis should be kept distinct from each other, both because they are weakly and imperfectly interconnected, and because they are the fruit of different processes, reconstructable through distinct methods of analysis.

The simple figure below¹¹ summarises the theoretical reference model which we have described.

Impact of the intervention

	Expected	Unexpected
Substantial		
Symbolic		

Design of the research

Methodological implications of the adopted theoretical model.

The decision to adopt an holistic and interpretive approach inevitably implies the selection of “case studies” as a unit of analysis, with “field work” as an essential phase in the project. In designing the study of cases, reference should be made to the model set out in the previous chapter, moving forward simultaneously on two parallel planes.

On the one hand, an analytic grill is constructed that is based on the existing literature as regards training evaluation: this literature – which to a large extent, as we have seen, adopts a theory of “programmable change” and has found its social and scientific legitimation in its emphasis on the “measurability” (and therefore, inevitably, the “substantial” tangibility) of foreseen and looked for effects - hypothesises a *temporal and determinist sequence of cause and effect relationships*, which incorporate the implicit cultural assumptions that have been mentioned earlier: ideas are transferred from one mind to another mind, which receives them and appropriates them, translating them into behaviour; the latter is then translated into concrete results; the aggregate concrete results are translated into the ‘performance’ of a group and subsequently into a progressively more extensive system. This linear sequence suggests two guidelines for collecting and organising data:

- 1) it is necessary to reconstruct – clearly isolating the three phases – the situation prior to the training intervention, the features of the intervention carried out and its intentions, the changes which have occurred after the intervention with respect to the initial situation;
- 2) the reconstruction of the impact implies the subsequent exploration of a “crescendo” of effects: participant satisfaction, learning, application, results for the organisation, results at a system level.

These guidelines suggest which information should be gathered, with whom one should speak, what questions should be put to the interviewees, how the analytic summary should be structured. At the same time, however, the most problematic theoretic conceptions that we have described above lead the evaluator to abandon the scheme every time that the reality of the data suggests other hypotheses, other relations, other sequences. They especially encourage him to investigate with particular care any unexpected, indirect, occasional, sometimes desirable, sometimes undesirable effects. In addition, an attempt is made to grasp the symbolic – in addition to the pragmatic – impact of the training event. Attention focused on the symbolic dimension inevitably involves viewing case studies as “microethnographies” (or “situational” ethnographies). It is in fact impossible to reconstruct the “meaning” of the course for participants without understanding the “sense attribution criteria” used by them, and hence their culture. Since culture is the fruit of collective history and experiences, one seeks – albeit within the limits of such short and focused investigations – to adopt an approach that is as “longitudinal” as possible, fully taking into account context, processes and past experiences. From this point of view the “before” – which the traditional scheme essentially regards as a parameter to *measure* the “after” – is also and above all used to *understand the “sense”* attributed by the actors to the training event and its results.

The attention devoted to the symbolic dimension does not imply any neglect of an identification and analysis of the “substantial” impact of the course. On the contrary, thorough research is always carried out in relation to evidence that documents the organisational effects of the best preparation of individuals involved.

The goal is therefore to identify only those effects that can be plausibly traced to the training initiative, noting any hypothetical correlations between the event and the general ‘performances’ (increase in turnover, overall efficiency, increase in profits etc.), every time the hypotheses are advanced by the actors. In this case, indeed, even if the correlation cannot be proven, the conviction that it exists demonstrates the impact of the course on the actors’ cognitive maps, and the behaviour that the said conviction can induce – in terms of training policies, personnel motivation, commitment etc. – can have important effects on company ‘performance’ over the medium term. This is a typical case in which a symbolic impact is translated over time into a substantial impact which, however, it is practically impossible “to isolate” and quantify.

Case studies: logic, operative modalities and objects

The cases to be studied are not chosen within a “sampling” logic (which assumes a certain number of analysis units as representative of a more extensive population) but within a “replication” logic, in which the objective is to verify whether the conclusions in a specific case can be confirmed by other specific cases, and therefore enjoy general application. One case can replicate another in a literal sense – because it leads to identical or similar conclusions – or in a theoretical sense, when the various results can be interpreted in relation to characteristics that are different from the situations analysed (foreseen *ex ante*, in the cases selection phase, or emerging *ex post*). Case study – as a research strategy – cannot provide us with any indication regarding the extent to which the features of the phenomenon observed in specific cases (for example, the type of impact that the training has had in the cases in question) are present in the population from which the cases are taken; nor does it permit us to verify the abstract and general relationships between the variables, but it is particularly suitable for the study of processes by which a phenomenon is expressed, interpreting the “how” and the “why” of the phenomenon viewed “holistically” within the specific context in which it is produced.

In general, the following measurement methods are used:

- a) *analysis of available and useful documents* in reconstructing the characteristics of the intervention, actors, context;
- b) *in-depth interviews*, semi-structured, with the following categories of subjects: client, trainers involved, direct addressees (participants), sometimes the final or indirect beneficiaries (for example, participants’ colleagues or superiors) and any privileged witnesses;
- c) *participating observation*, in the sense that the researcher – for the reasons we have illustrated earlier – tries to get as close as possible to the environment studied, to “live” (even if for very few days) alongside the actors, observing their work and relationship practices, and considering research data to comprise everything that happens to him within his albeit short period of stay in loco.

The number of interviews can vary considerably from case to case. The fundamental criteria used to decide – after an initial exploration involving representatives of the different categories of subjects set out above – whether or not it is necessary to continue gathering information comprise: cross-referencing control of data i.e. the degree of coherence which can be observed in the data gathered using different methods; and the so-called analytic “saturation of categories” i.e. the reasonable certainty that any additional data would not significantly modify the reconstruction and interpretation of the case in question.