

# The EvaluateIT Kit: A Method for Engaging Communities in Evaluating IT Projects

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## Abstract

All community development projects that involve communication and information technologies (C&IT) rely on interactive participation with community members and stakeholders. Participation in design, content development, literacy building and training are all important. When it comes to evaluating the impacts and effectiveness of community IT projects, participation is equally important. So how can community IT projects be evaluated in an inclusive and participatory way? This paper outlines how this can be achieved using an online resource kit developed by Queensland University of Technology and its industry partners <<http://www.evaluateit.org>>. The EvaluateIT kit is one of the results of three years of intensive research with two rural communities who were developing projects such as community websites to enhance their communities and improve communication and learning. In this paper we:

- discuss the value of participatory action research and participatory evaluation in evaluating community projects
- describe the process involved in designing and developing the EvaluateIT kit
- summarise results of questionnaires and focus group discussions on the kit with rural and regional participants
- present a detailed case study of how a community group successfully used the EvaluateIT process to improve a rural library website
- suggest other uses and applications of the kit.

## Keywords

Community participation and inclusion, participatory evaluation, evaluation resources, communication and information technology projects, rural community development

## Introduction

In Australia, governments and rural industry organisations have positioned new technologies such as the Internet as vital to community and economic development in rural and regional areas. Rural people are expected to benefit economically from new communication and information technologies (C&IT) because they will provide new employment opportunities, the potential to buy and sell online, an increase in services, and access to education and training (Da Rin and Groves 1999; Groves and Da Rin 1999a,

1999b; Hearn et al., 2005). However, many C&IT initiatives in rural Australia have failed (Geiselhart 2004). This is due to factors such as the small, highly scattered populations in many rural areas, limited funding and resources, lack of access to training and technical support, and reliance on enthusiastic 'champions' and volunteers to successfully maintain initiatives. The long-term sustainability of these initiatives is therefore a significant issue.

Community engagement and participation in the design, development and evaluation of community development projects that involve the use of C&IT are considered vital to the long-term sustainability and success of such projects (Hearn et al. 2005; Hearn and Foth 2005; Hudson 2001). However, our research suggests that achieving ongoing participation from a diversity of community members in evaluating the impacts and effectiveness of C&IT projects can be problematic (Lennie and Hearn 2003; Lennie et al., 2004). Issues that arise include: the excluding nature of the methods and language of evaluation (McKie 2003); inequalities in power and knowledge between professional evaluators and community members; and a lack of community knowledge, skills and experience in effectively planning and undertaking evaluations. In addition, workers in the community sector often see evaluation as a judgemental process that can have negative implications for ongoing project funding, rather than a continuous learning process that can assist in improving projects in ways that better meet community needs and goals (McKie 2003).

In this paper we outline a process that enables community IT projects to be evaluated in an inclusive and participatory way, using an online resource kit called 'EvaluateIT' <<http://www.evaluateit.org>>. The EvaluateIT kit is one of the results of three years of intensive research with two rural communities in Southern Queensland, Australia which had implemented projects such as community websites to enhance their communities and improve communication and learning.

We begin by discussing the value of participatory action research (PAR) and participatory evaluation methodologies in evaluating community projects. Then the research projects which led to the creation of the EvaluateIT kit are outlined, along with the process involved in designing and developing the kit. Results of questionnaires and focus group discussions on the kit with rural and regional participants are presented, along with a detailed case study of a rural community groups' use of the participatory EvaluateIT process to improve a library website. We also suggest other uses and applications of the kit.

### **The use of PAR and participatory evaluation in evaluating community projects**

Since the 1970s, participatory action research (McTaggart 1991; Reason 1994; Wadsworth 1998) has been widely used in community-based projects conducted in both developing and developed countries. There is no single, agreed definition of PAR. However, its key features are: a commitment to peoples' emancipation and empowerment, using processes that honour the lived experience and knowledge of those involved, and a commitment to 'genuine collaboration' (Reason 1994). PAR begins with the issues and problems raised by a community or organisation, rather than a research hypothesis. It aims to

achieve practical outcomes and so there is "an intimate link between research and action" (Thomas 2000, p. 100).

PAR encourages the active involvement of participants and stakeholders in the design and conduct of community projects and supports community engagement and capacity building processes. It can be a valuable means of involving a diversity of people in projects, generating appropriate action, new ideas and long term visions, fostering ongoing change and improvement, and regularly reflecting on outcomes (McTaggart 1991). The methods used in PAR projects are diverse and often experimental, but those emphasising collaboration and dialogue are favoured (Gatenby and Humphries 2000). Thomas (2000, p. 112) argues that PAR "challenges the hegemony of orthodox evaluation research methods" and therefore offers more opportunity to develop and evaluate long-term strategies for widening participation in education and lifelong learning.

While it is not always easy to achieve, PAR projects aim to develop equal partnerships and mutual trust between researchers and participants and to create knowledge that leads to action and positive social change. Knowledge is seen as related to power and power is related to change. PAR is a political process because it involves people making changes together that affect others (McTaggart 1991, p. 177). Sensitivity is therefore required in facilitating the participation of diverse community groups, communicating and interacting with participants and stakeholders, and reporting on evaluation projects. Critical reflection is a crucial step in each PAR cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting.

PAR has proved valuable in a diversity of fields, including community development, agricultural extension, education, health, and organisational management. It has also been successfully used in some C&IT projects (Simpson et al. 2001; The Rural Women and ICTs Research Team 1999). However, PAR has several limitations that need to be taken into account. They include: the greater time and resources required to successfully plan and conduct PAR projects, the difficulty of maintaining the active involvement of participants and stakeholders over an extended time, and the often complex power and control issues that can arise. This methodology can also produce unintended disempowering effects due to differences in power, knowledge and agendas and other factors (Lennie et al. 2004).

Participatory and empowerment evaluation methodologies (Brunner and Guzman 1989; Diez 2001; Dugan 1996; Fetterman et al. 1996; Papineau and Kiely 1996) emerged from the extension of PAR to evaluation (Garaway 1995) and the growing interest in evaluation as a learning and capacity building process. These methodologies have been effectively used in a diversity of fields, including agriculture and rural development, education, social services and health. While participatory evaluation methodologies have not been widely used to evaluate community IT projects, they are particularly useful in assessing complex community development projects, such as those involving the use of C&IT. C&IT projects raise many issues and challenges for community groups, including facilitating access to technologies by all

community members, and securing ongoing funding, resources and support to maintain initiatives and provide information literacy training to community members.

Three main reasons have been proposed for increasing the involvement of participants and stakeholders in evaluations: (1) to increase utilisation of evaluation results; (2) to represent the values and concerns of the multiple groups involved in decision-making; and (3) to promote the empowerment of disenfranchised stakeholder groups previously left out of the process (Papineau and Kiely 1996, p. 81).

In a participatory evaluation, the evaluators are the stakeholders or participants in a project. Professional evaluators act as methodological consultants and coaches and decisions about the evaluation process are usually jointly made by participants and evaluation consultants. For an evaluation to be considered participatory, Rebien (1996, p. 160) suggests that stakeholders must have an active role in the evaluation process, that at least representatives of stakeholders should participate, and that stakeholders should participate in at least three evaluation phases: "designing terms of reference, interpreting data, and using evaluation information". However, different forms of participatory evaluation methodology emphasise different levels of participation. Empowerment evaluation (Fetterman et al. 1996) is notable in that it encourages active involvement in all stages of the evaluation.

The methods and ethos of PAR and participatory evaluations thus contrast markedly with those of traditional forms of research and evaluation. In traditional approaches, the key questions and methods to be used are decided by the researcher, evaluator or funding body, the evaluator is expected to adopt an impartial and objective perspective, and program activities are reduced to measurable indicators (Vanderplaat 1995). In contrast, participant-oriented forms of evaluation tend to use more 'naturalistic' inquiry methods that aim to reflect "the complexities of everyday reality and the different perspectives of those engaged in providing services" (Worthen et al. 1997, p. 154). The scientific ideal of objectivity is usually rejected in favour of a more holistic approach that openly acknowledges and takes into account the diverse perspectives, agendas and values of participants, stakeholders and evaluation consultants. However, the 'trustworthiness' of results and rigor is obtained through using multiple methods of data collection and analysis, triangulation of this data, peer review, and engaging in regular critical reflexivity (Chess 2000; Guba and Lincoln 1989).

### **Use of PAR and participatory evaluation in the LEARNERS project**

The development of the EvaluateIT kit emerged from two research projects conducted at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in Brisbane: The LEARNERS project and the Information Literacy Resource Kit project. The LEARNERS project (Learning, Evaluation, Action & Reflection for New technologies, Empowerment and Rural Sustainability) was conducted from October 2001 to October 2004. This project aimed to build community capacities in evaluating C&IT initiatives such as community websites and information literacy programs. The smaller Information Literacy Resource Kit project was conducted from January to October 2004 in collaboration with the State Library of Queensland (SLQ) and

the Community Engagement Division of the Queensland Department of Communities. Its overall aim was to develop a practical and comprehensive tool for evaluating the impacts of the SLQ's community-based information literacy programs. The project built on and extended the LEARNERS project.

Previous research by members of the LEARNERS research team indicated that rural community members and staff of organisations that work closely with rural communities in Queensland often have limited skills and experience in participatory forms of research, planning and evaluation (Lennie et al. 2000). The need to build community and organisational capacities in these processes has been increasingly recognised by others working in this field (Fetterman et al. 1996; Wadsworth 1997; Boyle and Lemaire 1999; O'Sullivan and O'Sullivan 1998; Khan 1998). PAR, empowerment evaluation (Fetterman et al. 1996) and participatory evaluation have been found to be valuable in developing these capacities.

Using participatory evaluation and PAR methodologies informed by praxis feminist theories and methodologies (Lather 1991; Stanley and Wise 1990), the LEARNERS project trialled the use of a framework known as 'the LEARNERS process' by groups in two rural communities from early 2002 to late 2003. The LEARNERS process was considered innovative in that it took a 'whole of community' systems approach, used PAR and participatory evaluation methods, encouraged analysis of differences such as gender, age, ethnicity and skills with C&IT, and sought to develop 'learning communities' (Faris 2001). The aim of learning communities is closely related to the goals of community capacity building. They involve community members from every sector working together to enhance the social, economic, cultural and environmental conditions of their community and to promote lifelong learning (Faris 2001). Implementation of the LEARNERS process also aimed to increase collaboration and cooperation between diverse community organisations and groups and to generate new awareness, knowledge and ideas about the use of C&IT for sustainable community and economic development.

Two rural communities in Southern Queensland (the Tara and Stanthorpe Shires) and representatives of five public sector organisations participated in the project, which was conducted by a research team from QUT. The trial of the LEARNERS process aimed to enhance the sustainability and success of local C&IT initiatives and to increase community participation, empowerment and leadership. The project was underpinned by an awareness of the importance of women in Australian rural communities in the uptake of new C&IT, community development, and informal leadership activities (Grace and Lennie 1998; The Rural Women and ICTs Research Team 1999).

The research team adopted a critical approach which questioned assumptions about community participation, empowerment and the sustainability of C&IT projects. This approach recognised the often complex and contradictory nature of these processes that can affect the outcome of participatory evaluations, as well as the importance of paying attention to the communicative and relational dimensions of evaluation (McKie 2003). The various methods used in the LEARNERS project were underpinned by

positive 'power to' and 'power with' models in which power is seen as social and cooperative, rather than negative and related to domination and control (Deutchman 1991).

Workshops were conducted in each of the communities to plan evaluations, collaboratively analyse results, decide on actions to be taken, and reflect on the effectiveness of the process used. Participatory methods such as small group discussions, brainstorming and ranking of key actions and strategies emerging from evaluations were used in these workshops. Workshop participants were provided with copies of a diagram which summarised the aims and processes used in the LEARNERS process and the nine possible steps involved, information sheets about various forms of evaluation and the techniques used during the workshops, and other relevant information. This information was later published on the LEARNERS project website <<http://www.learners.qut.edu.au>>, which contained links to other community development and evaluation tools and resources. Communication and information sharing between participants, the research team and the project partners and critical reflection on the project was conducted extensively via various forms of C&IT, including email, the project website, and interactive conferencing technologies.

In both participating communities, a larger number of people took part in the initial workshops while a smaller core group continued their involvement. As in the community capacity building project reported by O'Meara et al. (2004), involving a wide diversity of community members and organisations was problematic. The majority of active participants were women in the 40-59 age group with a white and/or Anglo-Celtic ethnicity. Many participants worked in the areas of community development, education and training or local government, in both paid and voluntary positions.

Problems were initially experienced in both communities with generating understanding about the project. Local community coordinators and other participants reported that the terminology and methods used to explain the process were not adequately meeting the needs of some community members, particularly in the Tara Shire. While groups such as school teachers and principals understood the PAR methodology and the notion of evaluation as an action learning process, it was unfamiliar to other community members who were seeking more definite outcomes and greater direction from the research team. Nevertheless, various positive impacts of the project were reported in each community, including improved communication and networking, and increased skills and knowledge in participatory planning and evaluation.

### **Design and development of the EvaluateIT kit**

Feedback from community participants about their need for a simpler, easier to understand version of the LEARNERS process and more case studies and examples, led the research team to redesign the process in the period late 2003 to early 2004. The revised process was a simple four step evaluation process with key questions and a variety of other information and resources. This revised process became an online resource kit called 'EvaluateIT' <<http://www.evaluateit.org>>.

Revising the LEARNERS process initially involved a series of workshops in which the LEARNERS research team produced a much more simplified version of the original LEARNERS process diagram. Feedback on this revised diagram and notes on the various processes involved and suggestions for improvement were sought from community participants and the project's collaborating industry partners via email. Based on this feedback, which was mainly positive, some further revisions to the diagram were made.

At this point, members of the research team began work on the related Information Literacy Resource Kit project with the State Library of Queensland. The initial intention was to create one resource for the LEARNERS project and then adapt it to produce a more specific resource for the purposes of the SLQ. However, it became apparent that the revised and simplified evaluation process which had emerged from the LEARNERS project could be generic enough to evaluate the SLQ's information literacy programs. A prototype of a single online resource kit, named 'EvaluateIT', was therefore developed.

### ***Design of the prototype kit***

The prototype kit was constructed, building on and simplifying the LEARNERS process. Design and development of this kit drew on the feedback, findings and detailed case studies from the LEARNERS project and related research conducted for the Information Literacy Resource Kit project. Based on participatory evaluation and PAR processes, the prototype included:

- a home page with links to the four EvaluateIT steps: (1) Plan the review, (2) Involve people in the review, (3) Do the review, (4) Review results and make the changes
- key questions for each step
- links to a 'More help with these questions' page
- information about ways of using the kit with community groups
- a comprehensive case study of the whole evaluation cycle, based on the fictitious 'Westana' rural community (parts of this case study were adapted from actual examples)
- links to other electronic resources including toolkits, information on evaluation methods, community development and community IT, and relevant QUT publications
- links from key terms to a glossary providing simple definitions of the major processes, concepts and terms used in the kit
- information on the LEARNERS project and the SLQ project, and links to industry partner websites
- QUT contact information
- an online feedback form.

This prototype kit was made available online in both webpage and printable formats, available for download in both Word and PDF versions. It was completed in May 2004.

### ***Evaluation of the prototype kit***

Workshops, focus group discussions and questionnaires were the main methods used to obtain feedback about the prototype EvaluateIT resource kit. Four sites representing a range of rural and regional communities in Queensland were selected for testing and evaluating the prototype kit: Stanthorpe and Tara in Southern Queensland and Townsville and Charters Towers in North Queensland.

Workshops were conducted prior to the focus groups which allowed each group to begin working through a participatory evaluation using the EvaluateIT kit. Before the workshop and focus group, participants were asked to review the resource kit either online or by using the printable version downloaded from the website. They were also asked to review the IT project to be evaluated. A proforma containing key questions was provided to enable participants to make notes on the kit as they conducted this review.

In Stanthorpe, the workshops focussed on the new Stanthorpe Library website while the evaluation by the Tara group focussed on the Tara Shire Community website, which had previously been a major focus of the evaluation conducted during the LEARNERS project. In Charters Towers and Townsville, the evaluations focussed on Internet training courses that had been conducted as part of the BHP-Billiton Skills.net Roadshow Queensland program, conducted by the SLQ. The workshops were facilitated by a local community member where possible and generally followed the same format. Following introductions, the facilitator led the group through the steps of the kit. Each participant was invited to respond in turn to the questions provided in each section, before going on to the next question. Where possible, an online image of the kit was projected on to a screen, and/or participants were given a printed copy of the EvaluateIT steps and questions.

The focus groups that followed the workshops in each location were facilitated by a QUT team member. They gathered feedback on what worked well or did not work so well in using the kit for collaboratively planning the evaluation of the local C&IT project, how useful, practical and accessible the kit was, which parts of the kit were most useful and why, and suggestions for improvement. Suggestions were also obtained about possible future uses and benefits of the kit, and ways to promote the kit.

A total of 27 people (22 women and 5 men) participated in the four workshops and focus groups, as shown in Table 1. They included council staff, librarians from council libraries, library staff in schools, members of community support groups, staff from education centres, and senior citizens. They ranged in age, but the majority were women in the 40–59 age range working in government or local government departments or agencies. Collaborating partners from the Department of Family and Community Services and the SLQ participated in some workshops and focus groups.

**Table 1. Number and gender of participants at workshops and focus groups on the EvaluateIT kit**

Location	Gender		Total
	Female	Male	
Stanthorpe	6	0	6
Tara	2	3	5
Charters Towers	5	0	5
Townsville	9	2	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>27</b>

A questionnaire was also used to obtain feedback on the EvaluateIT resource, both from those preparing for the workshops and focus groups and from others who were interested but unable to participate. It was designed to enable participants to quickly rate the usefulness and effectiveness of the kit in general and the relative usefulness and effectiveness of the various parts of the kit, as well as to provide information on how and where they accessed/downloaded the kit, and background information on the respondent.

#### ***Results of the questionnaire***

Twenty-three respondents (17 women and 6 men) returned completed questionnaires. The majority of respondents (65 per cent) reviewed the kit on a computer at work and most of them (70– 87 per cent) found it from 'reasonably quick and easy' to 'extremely quick and easy' to download the website and the printable version of the kit and to move around the website.

Most parts of the kit were rated quite highly by the respondents (from 'quite useful and effective' to 'extremely useful and effective'). The 'More help with these questions for each step' section of the kit was given the highest rating by 95 per cent of respondents. The 'EvaluateIT steps and key questions', the 'Suggested ways of using EvaluateIT' page, and the Resources page were the next most highly rated. Fifty-two per cent of participants rated the case study from 'quite' to 'very useful and effective' and 8 per cent rated it as 'extremely useful and effective', while 35 per cent of participants rated the Glossary from 'very' to 'extremely useful and effective'.

#### ***Results of the focus group research***

In general, the focus groups provided very positive responses on using the kit to undertake evaluations of community C&IT projects, and on the design, content and application of the kit. The four step EvaluateIT process was considered simple and easy to understand for people without significant evaluation experience, and it was seen as being both inclusive and flexible. The resource kit was generally considered to be a very useful, well-designed, user-friendly and adaptable resource that could be used to evaluate IT training programs, review community websites, train facilitators, and evaluate other community-based projects, both large and small.

It was seen as an excellent way to keep an evaluation focussed on community outcomes in a way that encouraged and enabled broad community participation while remaining effective and efficient. Participants noted that it was generic enough to be used for a wide range of community projects, not just C&IT projects, and that it could be used to provide accountability to funding bodies for such projects.

The following is a summary of the main comments on the kit from focus group participants in the four communities.

On the kit generally:

*Congratulations on the development of the kit — it is excellent, uncluttered and downloads quickly.*

*The kit is comprehensive without being overwhelming, providing a structured plan to clarify what matters should be considered.*

*Reading all parts of the kit enabled a more comprehensive understanding of what the evaluation process was about.*

*It was a clear step-by-step process, very easy to use, even by groups without formal evaluation experience.*

*The graphics and colours are very appealing and useful for identifying quickly which step of the process you're on.*

*The kit makes good use of language and the absence of jargon and academic terms was appreciated.*

*It provided a structured, specific plan, so people knew what to consider.*

*It's a very adaptable resource - it could be used to evaluate a range of projects by a range of groups.*

Other comments on the resources included in the kit were:

*The steps and questions helped the group to focus and move along.*

*The specific questions were useful for prompting the discussion.*

*The case study was wonderful as a starting point and it was valuable to read about a practical application of the process.*

*The 'More help with these questions' section was very valuable.*

*The 'Suggested ways of using the kit' page was most helpful in providing information on applying these skills to obtain a result, particularly the information about organising and conducting workshops.*

*The Resources and Glossary pages were very helpful with links to definitions and further tools.*

*It's useful to have the printable version in both Word and PDF formats to enable a more detailed reading of the resource.*

Suggestions for improvement included providing a wider range of examples of how the kit could be used and linking these to the home page, as well as making entry into the EvaluateIT process more self-evident for those not familiar with participatory evaluation processes.

Recommendations for promoting awareness and use of the kit in rural and regional communities included suggestions for dissemination. Participants also acknowledged the challenge of getting groups to use it, particularly where there was little awareness of participatory evaluation processes, and strongly recommended that measures be taken to demonstrate personally to key community members how the kit could be used to benefit their projects. Suggestions for promoting the kit included:

- awareness can be promoted by using a range of methods such as word-of-mouth, brochures and electronic fliers, press releases to newspapers and radio, and notices on community email lists
- local awareness of the kit needs to be generated through a community workshop. 'Hand-holding' may be necessary to promote the kit and encourage groups to use it
- the fact that the EvaluateIT process is transferable to evaluations of non-IT projects should be emphasised
- testimonials from groups that use the kit and endorsement by government agencies should be obtained to give it credibility
- many organisations could be asked to promote the kit at specific events.

#### **Case study: Use of the EvaluateIT kit to review the Stanthorpe Library website**

The Stanthorpe Shire was one of the two communities involved in the trial of the LEARNERS process. The Shire is located 230 kilometres south west of Brisbane in a farming region which is popular with tourists, due to its many wineries and nearby national parks. A key outcome of the LEARNERS project in this community was the development of a group which became actively involved in a project that aimed to develop the region as a learning community. LEARNERS project participants in this area were therefore interested in taking part in the assessment of the EvaluateIT kit

Following discussions with local LEARNERS project participants, including the Manager of Stanthorpe Library Services, the new Stanthorpe Library website was selected as the focus of the evaluation workshop that aimed to assess the prototype EvaluateIT kit. An effective local library service was important to the Stanthorpe LEARNERS group, given the group's interest in promoting lifelong learning in the community. The Stanthorpe Library is operated by the Stanthorpe Shire Council, which was a key collaborator in the LEARNERS project.

The workshop was attended by 10 women. They comprised five local LEARNERS project participants, a local teacher who was interested in the project and had agreed to facilitate the workshop, a representative from SLQ and one of the collaborating partners in the LEARNERS project, and two members of the QUT research team. The five LEARNERS project participants comprised:

- the Web Coordinator/Public Relations Officer with the Stanthorpe Shire Council who was the local coordinator of the LEARNERS project
- a volunteer with a local disability support group
- a part-time community development worker
- a local small business operator who was very active in community organisations and was undertaking an Adult and Vocational Education course
- the Manager of Stanthorpe Library Services.

A copy of the home page for the EvaluateIT website was projected on a screen for all workshop participants to see, and participants were provided with a copy of the four EvaluateIT steps and questions for each step. Notes on the workshop discussions were taken by one of the collaborating partner representatives. They were publicly displayed on butchers paper and typed up by one of the LEARNERS research team during the workshop.

Following introductions, the Manager of Stanthorpe Library Services provided a brief background history of the library's website. She explained that an earlier library website had become outdated and was not 'user-friendly' and that the new website had been established during the previous year when a skilled trainee had been able to work on the site. However, funding had run out before the website was fully completed so it was still being developed. She thought that there was still 'room for improvement'.

Prior to the workshop, participants had been asked to review both the library website and the EvaluateIT kit, and to make notes on each which they were asked to bring to the workshop. The workshop began with participants being asked for feedback on what was working well with the website, what was not working so well, and suggestions for improvement. This provided valuable initial feedback on the website. While most of the participants were impressed with the new website, they made several suggestions for improvement.

With the guidance of the facilitator, the group then began the process of providing comments and suggestions related to each of the four steps in the EvaluateIT process.

1. Plan the review
2. Involve people in the review
3. Do the review
4. Review results and make the changes.

Step 1 involved discussing who wanted to conduct the review and the purpose of the review. Some of the purposes identified were:

- to get funding — from initial establishment to employing someone on an ongoing basis to maintain the site and update information
- to improve the site
- to assess if it is efficient

- to maximise community access and use and address community needs
- to assess the ongoing costs involved (i.e. time and money)
- to inform decision makers about the usefulness of the site.

Participants also considered possible risks involved in doing the review, such as the potential that negative feedback could be 'demotivating', and that there could be clashes between different opinions and needs, depending on who became involved. Possible ethical dilemmas were also discussed, such as the need to obtain consent from people before photographs could be published on the site.

In Step 2, participants identified a wide range of community groups and organisations and types of community members who could be invited to take part in the evaluation. They included Youth Council members, people undertaking University of the Third Age courses, 'out of towners with young families', and students undertaking 'Introduction to the Internet' courses conducted by the library. Participants suggested involving a broad cross-section of the community, such as non-library users and people who had been members in the past, as well as the library's main clientele. They also thought that feedback from people such as 'irate customers' and the developers of other library websites could be valuable.

Next, participants discussed what would encourage people to participate in the evaluation. Suggestions included:

- running groups for different age groups
- using captive audiences such as participants at youth group meetings, who may not want to take part in a workshop with adults
- offering incentives to participate such as morning tea and information about the library website
- asking people to complete surveys when they are at the library
- broadcasting information about the evaluation through avenues such as community radio talk-back.

In Step 3 of the process, the participants listed a range of goals of the Library website (such as 'to provide a means of engaging people', and 'to promote the library's services'). They then considered how the library was trying to achieve these goals; how well the library was reaching these goals and how it would know this. The Library Manager explained that the majority of feedback was currently received verbally and was used to monitor progress towards goals and to assess which services were most effective. A range of suggested methods for the evaluation of the library website were suggested. They included: adding facilities to collect statistics on which webpages were used most often; conducting a street survey to gather feedback on why people may not be using the library; and conducting a survey as part of an Adult Learners Week forum for community groups. Participants also suggested that this would be a great opportunity to 'showcase' the new library website.

Based on these discussions, the group then considered how the website could be improved. A large number of useful suggestions were put forward. Some participants suggested that survey questions could be developed from the initial ideas generated at the workshop. Others thought that a number of small review workshops could be held and the feedback combined. The Library Manager said that she would aim to implement some of the changes to the website suggested by the workshop group prior to the Adult Learners Week forum. Some participants proposed publicising the review process, and the changes that were being made to the website to better meet community needs, by sending out a press release to the local newspaper.

In Step 4 of the process, the participants reflected on the evaluation process used in the workshop. This included assessing how representative the group had been. While one participant thought the group was 'fairly representative', the group agreed that wider community feedback and involvement was needed. They also considered that it was important to provide results of the review and to promote the benefits of doing the review to the Stanthorpe Shire Council and any other funding bodies or stakeholders who could be involved in improving the website. The Library Manager commented that the feedback on the website provided by the workshop participants had been 'thought provoking' and 'really beneficial' as both small, easy to make changes, as well as more substantial changes, had been identified.

Finally, the group discussed how the changes that were needed would actually be made. The Stanthorpe Library was identified as responsible for making the changes. It was considered that many of the improvements identified could be implemented quite quickly and easily and that funding could be sought from other community organisations such as Lions or Arts funding bodies to make other, more costly changes. Positive statistics that could potentially be obtained from survey results were seen as useful for funding campaigns. Local media such as radio and newspapers could be used to raise community awareness of the website and the evaluation and to generate interest in taking part in the process.

The Library Manager commented that her expectations for the workshop were 'met really well' but she was 'disappointed that we couldn't get more people along'. The following summarises comments about the workshop that were made in the focus group discussions, held immediately after the workshop:

*The workshop was easy to facilitate*

*It was good to have an experienced person to help facilitate the evaluation*

*It was easy to see what's expected of participants*

*Doing the review at the same time as planning the evaluation worked well — doing a review within a review is a natural 'circles within circles process'*

*Flexibility in the process is good — it's OK to jump between steps of the process*

*Everyone was able to make valuable input into the discussion*

*The discussions were stimulating*

*It was a good process for pulling together various ideas.*

The Stanthorpe focus group participants thought the EvaluateIT kit provided a structured, specific plan, so that people knew what issues to consider. The 'precise' step by step process also gave 'a feeling of unity to the process'. The 'More help with these questions' section was considered 'very valuable' while the specific questions in each step were seen as 'useful for prompting the discussion'. However, some problems were also identified, including the 'challenge' of getting people to take part in workshops and some finding it hard to 'visualise the experience'. There was also a need to be clearer about 'what was expected from the people participating in the review'.

Participants considered that the EvaluateIT process was a 'transparent' and 'transferable' process which would be valuable in other evaluations, not just evaluations of C&IT projects. One commented that the kit 'formalises in a fairly simple way the process of evaluation that people often use in an informal setting or manner'. Another participant thought that the opportunity for 'equal input from group members' was valuable, while another commented that it seemed like 'a non-discriminatory resource'. Participants offered a number of suggestions for improving the kit, most of which were taken into account in the revision process.

### **Revisions to the EvaluateIT kit**

Based on the feedback collected from the workshops, focus groups, and questionnaires, a number of revisions, including those listed, were made to the EvaluateIT kit.

- Changes were made to the welcome page to make it more self-explanatory and to guide the user into the evaluation process itself.
- The printable versions of the kit were revised to ensure that sufficient information was available on the Welcome page to enable users to grasp the basic process, understand the structure of the resource kit, and know where to begin the evaluation process.
- A new 'Examples' page was created, including the comprehensive case study already written, and three new case studies which describe more briefly evaluations of a BHP-Billiton IT training courses, a Learning Network Queensland centre, and an Indigenous students' email discussion list. This was incorporated into both the online and print versions of the resource kit.
- A link was made from the home page to this Examples page, and between each of the steps and the comprehensive example/case study using a separate button for heightened visibility and easier access.

A copy of the home page of the final version of the EvaluateIT kit is shown in Figure 1.

### **Other uses and applications of the kit**

As well as for effectively reviewing or evaluating C&IT projects such as community websites, the focus group participants in the four sites considered that the EvaluateIT kit could have a range of other applications. They included using the kit to:

- train facilitators

- standardise evaluation process at all levels of government. This was seen as promoting 'consistency in evaluation'
- evaluate community events, local shows, or any sort of project
- encourage users to 'embrace technology rather than be ignorant or scared of it'
- obtain a 'clear and precise localised blueprint' of a community and its needs, and feedback from the community
- review community-based training or development activities.

Participants at a later SLQ workshop on the kit, involving 30 staff from a range of government organisations, also suggested a number of possible uses of the kit. They included: to consider different approaches to assessing a community history website, to evaluate a program that delivers health information to women around Queensland via videoconference, and to identify ways of increasing the interactivity of websites. Some of the suggestions about key factors in successful evaluations, identified by these workshop participants, were:

- begin by deciding if an evaluation is actually needed, given that evaluations can have potentially negative impacts
- build on existing data collected and other evaluations
- consider ways to involve both users and non-users of a C&IT initiative in an evaluation
- ensure that results are valid and reliable.

The EvaluateIT resource kit is currently being used by a number of organisations, including the State Library of Queensland and the Queensland Department of Natural Resources and Mines. Interest in using the kit has been expressed by many other community and government organisations. The EvaluateIT website is expected to be widely accessed once further promotion of the kit is undertaken.

## **Conclusion**

McKie (2003, p. 320) argues that 'Whether we like it or not evaluation has created a language and modus operandi that can be excluding'. Successfully including a diversity of community members in evaluations requires that issues related to the appropriateness of the methods and language used and the perceived value and relevance of participation and evaluation to various groups are addressed. Otherwise, some community members may see evaluations as a judgemental process that could have negative implications for their employment or the funding of their projects, rather than an ongoing learning process that can help to improve projects in ways that better meet community goals and needs.

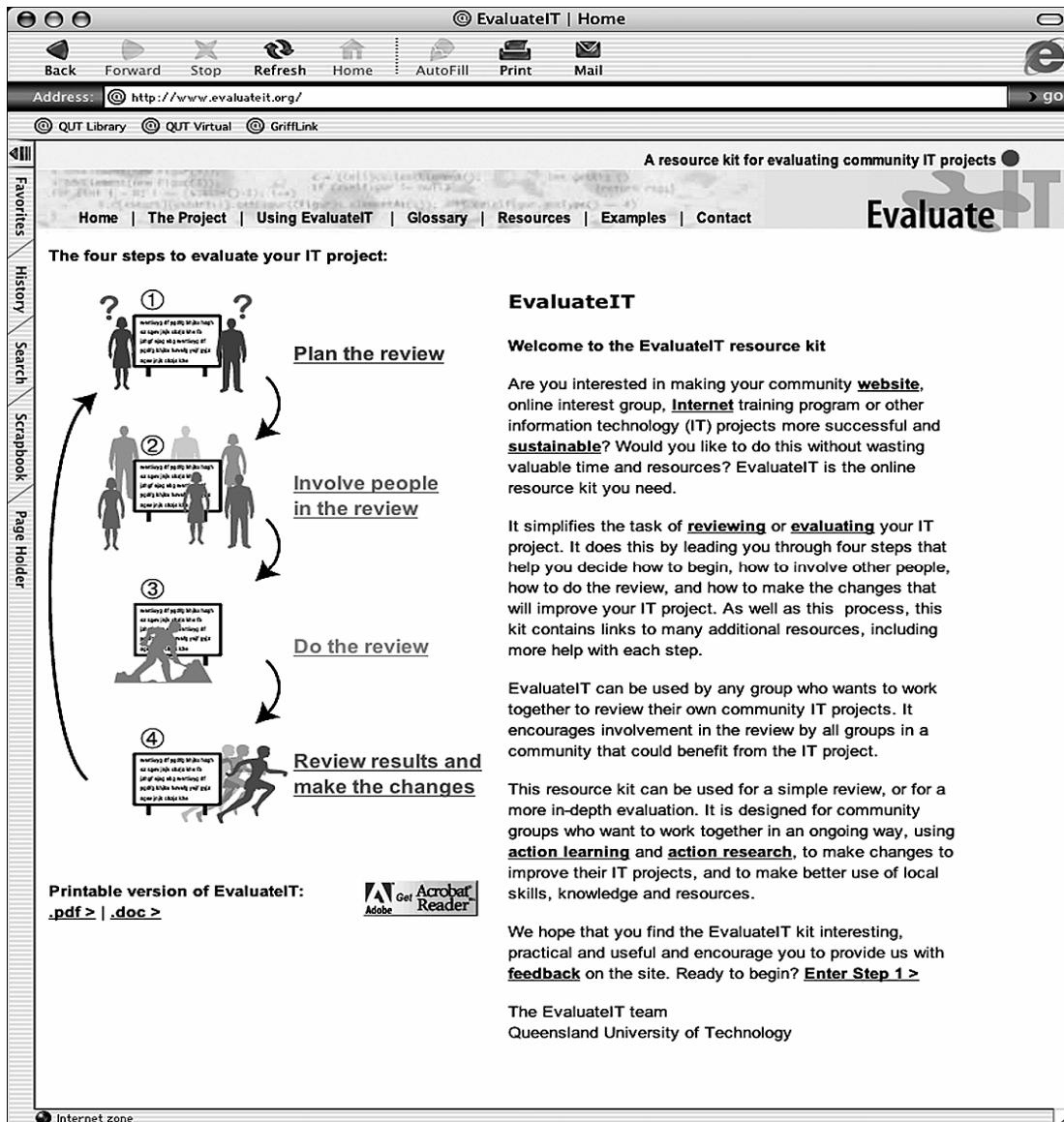


Figure 1. The EvaluateIT home page

'User friendly' resources such as the EvaluateIT kit are a valuable means of demystifying evaluation and actively engaging a broader diversity of community groups and stakeholders in an evaluation or impact assessment. Our research suggests that the EvaluateIT kit is a useful tool for introducing community members to the various steps involved in planning and conducting an evaluation, in a practical and non-threatening way. The process also enables groups to generate valuable ideas for increasing community participation, awareness and engagement in C&IT projects, which can help to improve their long-term sustainability and success. However, our research indicates that to be successful, workshops that use the kit should be facilitated by people who have local credibility, skills in facilitation and communication, an understanding of the principles of participatory evaluation, and familiarity with the EvaluateIT website and kit. In addition, issues related to the many barriers to participation in rural communities need to be addressed. Successful participatory evaluations require time, energy and resources that may not always be readily available.

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