

Report on outcomes and get everyone involved: The Participatory Performance Story Reporting Technique

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the emerging technique named Participatory Performance Story Reporting technique. This technique presents a framework for reporting on contribution to long-term outcomes (or targets) using mixed methods and participatory process. The process steps include clarifying the program logic, developing guiding questions for the social inquiry process and data trawl. Final conclusions about the extent to which a program has contributed to outcomes are made at an 'outcomes panel' and recommendations are developed at a large group workshop. The intention of this paper is to simply introduce the technique and to discuss bias, limitations and where it might best be applied.

What are performance story reports?

Performance story reports are essentially a short report about how a program contributed to outcomes. Although they may vary in content and format, most are short, mention program context and aims, relate to a plausible results chain, and are backed by empirical evidence (Dart and Mayne, 2005).

The term 'performance story' was introduced by John Mayne in a paper that was published in 2004. PPSRs aim to strike a good balance between depth of information and brevity. They aim to be easy for staff and stakeholders to understand, and help build a credible case about the contribution that a program has made towards outcomes or targets. They also provide a common language for discussing different programs and helping teams to focus on results.

What is the Participatory Performance Story Reporting technique?

The Participatory Performance Story Reporting (PPSR) technique yields one specific type of 'Performance Story Report' (PSR) and follows a particular participatory process. This technique was developed by Jess Dart and is characterized by two elements: a five-stage participatory process whereby the information is generated and a five-part structure in which the report product is presented.

Performance story report structure

Performance story reports aim to explore and report on the extent to which an intervention has *contributed* to outcomes. They are thus aimed at answering the "impact" question. Further, Mayne (2003) suggests that credible PSRs should note intended accomplishments, report achievements against expectations, discuss what was learned and what will be changed, and describe steps taken to ensure the quality of the data presented.

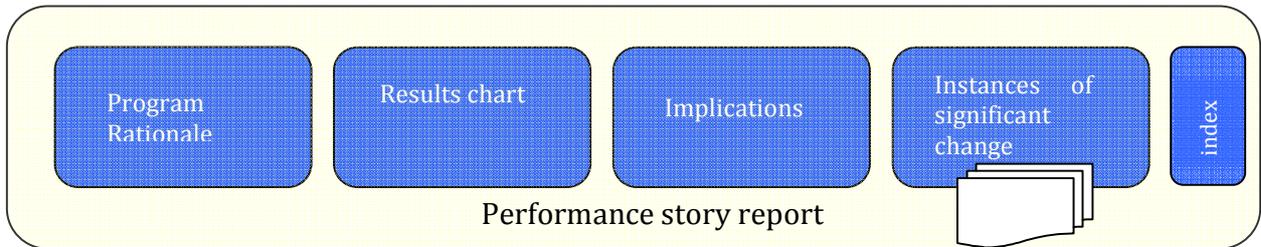
Under the PPSR, reports are generally structure the reports against the following sections:

1. A narrative section explaining the **program context** and rationale.
2. A '**results chart**' which summarises the achievements of a program against a program logic model.
3. A narrative section describing the **implications** of the results e.g. what was learned, and what will be changed as a result of what has been learned.
4. A section which provides a number of 'vignettes' that provide **instances of significant change**, usually first person narratives.

- 5. An index providing more detail on the sources of **evidence**.

Under PPSR, the reports are approximately 20 pages long, although depending on the purpose and context of the report it may be as brief as a colour brochure.

A typical layout is shown below:



Participatory process

Participatory Performance Story Reporting technique advocates a participatory process to generate the information that goes into the report. There are key learning and reflection opportunities throughout the process for key stakeholders to be involved. Participation in the process of discovery and analysis also engenders ownership and increases the chances that findings will be acted upon.

A suggested process for conducting a PSR is as follows:

Participatory Process

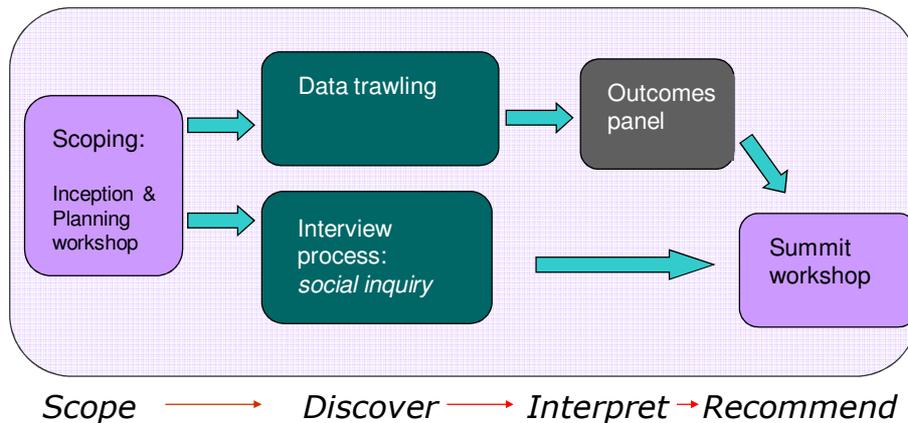


Figure 2. Process of PPSR

Participation can occur at all stages of this process for example:

1. **In the planning workshop.** In this workshop the program logic is surfaced, existing data is identified and evaluation questions developed. Consultants play the role of facilitation and documentation.
2. **In the data trawl.** Program staff may be enlisted to help with the collation of data, although in our experience consultants usually lead this process as the evaluation managers.
3. **The social inquiry process.** Volunteers can be given a short training session in interviewing and with the help of an interview guide can conduct the interviews. This is a very effective way to involve staff in the data where there is sufficient enthusiasm around the process. Otherwise consultants or the evaluation managers conduct all or a proportion of the interviews.
4. **Outcomes panel.** People with relevant scientific, technical, or sectoral knowledge are brought together and presented with a range of evidence compiled by the consultants. They are then asked to assess the contribution of the intervention towards goals given the available knowledge. We call this an outcomes panel that is facilitated by consultants. It is sometimes also referred to as an expert panel.
5. **Summit workshop.** At a large workshop instances of significant change are selected and key findings and recommendations are synthesised. The summit should involve broad participation of key stakeholders such as program staff and community members.

Why are they attractive to organisations?

Organisations often place a high value on PSRs because they strike a good balance between depth of information and brevity and are easy for staff and stakeholders to understand. They help build a credible case that a contribution has been made. They also provide a common language for discussing different programs and helping teams to focus on results. They have been used in a wide range of sectors from overseas development, community health, and indigenous education. But the majority of work has occurred in the Natural Resource Management Sector, with the Australian Government funding 14 pilot studies in 2007-8.

Some of the limitations of Performance Story Reporting

Bias: PSR's have been criticised for being too appreciative, or for being incapable of telling a bad story. While this is certainly a risk, the approach does attempt to address this in a number of ways. Firstly all informants are asked to describe the strengths and the weaknesses of the investment. These weaknesses or issues are documented in the report. Secondly, the outcomes panel is encouraged to report on negative as well as positive trends in terms of the state of the asset. So the “negatives” are not avoided in this process.

However, the choice of topic for a performance story is purposeful rather than randomly selected. Topics for performance story reports are selected on the basis that they are likely to show some significant outcomes. This needs to be understood and acknowledged. For this reason, PPSR should not be seen as the only reporting tool. The idea is that it should complement other reporting processes.

Limited in terms of scope: PSR's only address one type of key evaluation question. That is the question concerning the extent to which an investment contributes to outcomes, or the “impact” question. It is an extremely important question, but it is not the *only* type of key evaluation question that is important. Other key evaluation questions include:

- The appropriateness of the investment or intervention
- The cost effectiveness of the investment or intervention

PPSR is not designed to address these questions. They may be added into this methodology relatively easily, but are not covered by this approach as it currently stands. This approach is focused on the contribution question, and in an attempt to keep the report short, other types of evaluation have not been included as yet.

External or internal evaluation?

Participatory Performance Story Reporting can be conducted both internally by program staff or contracted as external evaluation work, depending on the context.

Who is the audience for the Product?

Performance Story Reports can be used for a wide range of audiences, but it is very important to think about whom you are targeting in your report before you start. This may affect the degree of detail supplied and the language used.

Choice of topic for a Performance Story Report

Of all the issues that have vexed the PPSR process, the issue of appropriate scale has been perhaps the most challenging. Our experience to date suggests that PSRs apply most readily to the scale of a reasonably large program that may have several projects underneath it. Program size and nature tend to be defined in different ways by each organisation, so it is hard to be specific. Key elements of a program that would make it a good choice for PPSR would be: that there are clear outcomes and all the activities within the program are

intended to contribute to these outcomes, and that there are clear geographic and temporal boundaries.

Core elements

The PPSR technique offers a fairly specific set of steps and reporting structure. The idea of providing this level of detail is more to provide clear guidance for the beginner, rather than to restrict innovation and modification of the technique. Practitioners are encouraged to innovate and adapt this technique to their context.

The fundamental aspects of a PPSR are:

1. PPSRs are short yet provide enough context to understand the program intent.
2. Include a results chart where empirical findings are summarised against a logic model.
3. All the evidence is referenced and the report is fully auditable.
4. The key lessons, achievements and recommendations are developed in consultation with key stakeholders of the program via a workshop process.
5. Some form of narrative is included to illustrate the rich picture of achievements.
6. An ethical process is adhered to in the inquiry process.
7. Both positive and negative findings are presented.
8. The results include some frank commentary about the extent to which a program could plausibly have contributed to outcomes.

Within the scope of these core elements, there are many ways to innovate and adapt the technique.

References

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