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Book Review: Outcome Harvesting: Principles, Steps, and Evaluation Applications

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Keywords

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Wilson-Grau, R. (2019). *Outcome harvesting: Principles, steps, and evaluation applications*. Information Age.

Research of complex processes can be challenging, as it can rarely capture the unintended consequences the intervention under investigation, but instead focuses on proving or disproving a hypothesis. In education, often proving or disproving a hypothesis is often not enough to fully realize the scope and consequences of an intervention. This is where Outcome Harvesting, (OH), a novel method of program evaluation, can fill the gap. Ricardo Wilson-Grau's book, *Outcome Harvesting: Principles, Steps, and Evaluation Applications* (2019), is a comprehensive guide to assist both the novel and experienced researcher through the process of OH to capture all outcomes from an intervention and generate meaningful outcome statements for the group.

Although this is the first book on OH, Wilson-Grau has been using OH for professional evaluation since 2002 (Wilson-Grau, 2019). Originally it was used to evaluate the effectiveness of programs from the realm of international social change networks, through the lens of securing or evaluating the use of organizational funds. The name itself has roots in Wilson-Grau's own experience with farming. In the preface of the book, he describes his experience working with farmers in Columbia as part of the U.S Peace Corps. Due to a volatile political situation, the farmers were displaced into the jungle, where they converted the jungle to farmland. The farmers experienced challenges of trying to grow new crops in a landscape that was socially, politically, economically, and culturally complex. The process of cultivating new land would lay the foundation for the steps that would then become Outcome Harvesting (Wilson-Grau, 2019).

The origin story of OH is interesting, but what could farm practices, not for profit agencies, and education and higher learning have in common? They are all settings with a complex web of education, geopolitical, institutional, and cultural factors. This evaluation method is well suited to a complex system such as curricular change where such unintended consequences previously have been difficult to quantify (Heileman et al., 2018). In addition to this, many of the projects, like education, hinge on funding, and it can take decades to fully reveal the benefits or detrimental effects of an intervention. This can make providing the evidence for continued or judicious use of funding challenging.

OH is separated from other evaluation methods in that it seeks to identify the observable changes in behaviours of individuals or groups after an innovation or change, through reasonable causal relationships (Wilson-Grau, 2019). The purpose is to benefit the primary users of that change and through a six-step approach generate meaningful outcome statements that capture the intended and unintended consequences of the innovation being studied. The six steps are: (1) design the harvest, (2) review the documents, (3) engage sources, (4) substantiate, (5) analyse and interpret, and (6) support the use of findings. For each step of the process, there are clear examples. There is also a guide of the expected yield from each step and an estimation of the amount of time that step takes. In addition to the six steps, there are nine core principles to help with the process. These nine core principles are subdivided into two categories: (a) those that influence process and (b) those that influence content. The principles that influence process are: (a) facilitate usefulness throughout the harvest, (b) coach human sources to formulate outcome statements, (c) nurture appropriate participation, (d) less is more, and (e) learn through experience (Wilson-Grau, 2019). These principles are meant to help with the flow and overall success of the harvest. The content principles are: (a) harvest social change outcomes, (b) formulate an outcome as an observable change, (c) establish reasonable causality, and (d) ensure the outcome is credible enough (Wilson-Grau, 2019). These principles are aimed at the kind of results the harvest yields.

The complete process is guided by a Harvester. This is a person or persons who are responsible for designing the Harvest, gathering the necessary documents and secondary sources, and assembling the primary users who will help with the harvest itself. The Harvester is a person who is derived from within the group or has knowledge of the system and unlike many other forms of research and is not totally impartial. In OH, it is the fact that the Harvester is derived from within the group of users that adds to the accountability and trustworthiness in the results. There is a clear line though. The Harvester does not generate the outcome statements or influence the result, they gain the appropriate knowledge of the intervention and have the perspective of the complex system under study to have the ability to coach the users in identifying and linking the outcomes to the intervention. They also guide the development of outcome statements, but not the content. “Less is more” is a philosophy used by this method, and Wilson-Grau gives helpful guidance on how to generate meaningful outcome statements without overwhelming stakeholders. The result of the harvest is outcome statements that are credible, relatable, and purposeful.

OH has not yet established itself as a research methodology in education and higher learning, so there is not much in the literature to support its flexibility and suitability as yet. However, Railer et al. (2020) used OH to link outcomes from the implementation of Competency Based Medical Education (CBME) program for post graduate medical training. The authors were derived from within the community that assisted with the conversion of the school to CBME from more traditional forms of medical education, but none of the authors were affiliated with one particular training program. Through their involvement with the development and implementation, but not the individual outcomes of the programs, the authors understood the culture and changes that happened at their school and were able to gain easy access to the documents associated with the program. They detail each of the steps as Wilson-Grau has laid out, which, like the examples in the book, would be useful for those in education to see how it has been adapted to education. Railer et al. (2020) focused on reviewing documents related to this intervention. Their work has laid the groundwork for additional exploration of postgraduate curricular change through OH. Wilson-Grau’s book was a nice combination of the theory and evolution of OH and a practical manual on the step by step development and problem solving of OH. Wilson-Grau effectively marries the theory of OH, through the storytelling of its creation and past use, with practical logistical advice that would benefit novice or experienced researcher alike. The book is just shy of 200 pages and was well organized for easy reference. The breakdown of topics and ability to capture what is a complex system into tangible and internally valid results will make it a useful reference going forward for researchers of a variety of backgrounds, including education.

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