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GOT A MINUTE?

A stairwell talk can turn evaluation into everyday business

Everyone seems to agree: it's time to stop talking about it and start evaluating professional development programs. The field is under unprecedented scrutiny by school boards, policy makers, and funding agencies. They want us to evaluate professional development programs for two good reasons: to improve their quality and to document the impact of programs. We have a whole litany of valid reasons that good program evaluation does not happen. Do these statements sound familiar:

"We have too many programs underway to evaluate each one using a research design."

"We have so little control of intervening variables that we couldn't possibly track what principals and teachers do with what they learn."

"We've collected reams of self-report data from teachers and principals but our board wants to hear only one thing – increases in student test scores."

"Many of our professional development efforts are aimed at changing attitudes and the culture around teaching and learning. Changes in the affective domain are very difficult to measure without longitudinal data."

"We don't have in-house program evaluation experts and we can't afford to hire enough outside expertise to do it right."

"We're afraid to mention evaluation when launching a new initiative. It squelches enthusiasm and the word causes people to be suspicious."

There are formidable hurdles to overcome before good evaluation becomes a standard part of initiatives involving professional development. Program evaluation is not part of the culture of most organizations. Many program decisions are based on hunches and power struggles and pet interests of key people rather than evaluation data.

Evaluation is much less confusing and overwhelming when it's considered from two very different perspectives: formative or ongoing evaluation vs. summative or summarizing or culminating evaluation.

FORMATIVE EVALUATION

Formative evaluation is everyday work. It does need not to be complicated, expensive, or time-consuming. It describes something teachers, principals, and educational leaders do everyday: monitor and adjust programs to get the best possible results.

Both monitoring and adjusting can be done by insiders. They don't require outside evaluation experts or adherence to a particular evaluation model. Formative data can be gathered, analyzed, summarized, and reported by in-house people who have also been program designers and implementers. When done well, formative evaluations can produce credible evidence of proof.

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SIMPLE AS-YOU-GO EVALUATION STRATEGIES

TRACK QUESTIONS

Questions provide a rough but valid gauge of: a) interest level, b) areas of confusion, c) familiarity with new terminology, or d) the level of involvement by participants.

During each meeting, make 5x8 index cards available for participants. Encourage participants to jot down questions and give to you at the end of each session.

To analyze written responses, try this general "content analysis" approach:

1. Read and then analyze or "make sense" of each question card.

2. Separate the cards into major categories based on the writer's main message.

3. Validate your categorization by having another person independently examine and analyze the cards' content. Negotiate differences so that you reach an agreement.

4. Summarize the data. Use examples of specific or typical questions for illustration and use as much detail as seems appropriate.

5. Check the accuracy of your summary with others who also examined the cards. Alternatively seek the reaction of several participating teachers who submitted questions.

60-SECOND REFLECTONS

A reflection strategy helps determine a) what participants understand about the study group topic, b) if participants see how to make connections with their particular students and content, c)what content the participants are not considering using yet, and d) whether participants use the terminology of the topic with ease.

Distribute 5 x 8 cards at the end of a study group session.

Ask participants to answer one reflective question in 60 seconds, such as "What has the study group on brain compatible teaching caused you to think about changing in your daily practices?"

To analyze, use a content analysis approach similar to the one described in "Track Questions" at the left.

THREE-MINUTE PAPER

Use this any time to capture participants' understanding at this moment on a particular topic. For example, at the end of an awareness level workshop, use it to check for understanding of a specific construct. An open-ended question that would fit the three-minute format might be "Using Phil Schlecty's definition of quality work for students, describe an example of what you consider to be the highest quality work you are designing now for your students?

Ahead of time, prepare sheets of paper that include one open-ended question at the top of each sheet. Distribute the sheets.

Set an egg timer for three minutes. Have everyone stop writing when the timer goes off.

To build a culture in which evaluation is an everyday part of the work, focus on these eight guidelines:

1. Be open and collaborative in any evaluation effort, whether formative or summative, from the beginning.

2. Collect only formative data you intend to use to improve the program immediately. Formative data get stale quickly.

3. Gather data regularly to track and document each program's peaks, valleys, and plateaus.

4. Ensure that everyone involved in implementing the program becomes proficient at gathering and making sense of formative data.

5. Plan ahead to capture data gathering opportunities.

6. Gather a variety of data from various sources to help make decisions about necessary adjustments: feedback cards, pre/post tests, attendance records, portfolios of work produced by participants, samples of student work, check-up quizzes given to participants, pictures of teachers and their students in classrooms where new strategies are being practiced, written documents produced by participating teams, etc.

7. Use technology – digital cameras, e-mail, video cameras – to lighten the work and enhance your data collection efforts.

8. Summarize the formative data on any initiative within an hour after you receive the request.

SUMMATIVE EVALUATION

Formative evaluation is never a substitute for summative evaluation. Summative evaluation also needs to be higher on our evaluation agenda, especially for programs which are major commitments of organizations.

Summative evaluation is done very differently from formative evaluation and serves a different purpose. It requires more formal procedures, sometimes using an experimental design but more often using a descriptive approach. To be considered credible and useful, summative evaluation should follow the research methods and standards of the American

SIMPLE AS-YOU-GO EVALUATION STRATEGIES

FIVE-MINUTE STAIRWELL CONVERSATIONS

Each week as you initiate and implement a new program, make a point of speaking briefly, about five minutes, with a random sample of participants.

Introduce conversation with an open-ended, simple question, such as: "We're meeting with the consultant this week. Do you have anything you think we should be sure to mention to her?" Or later on, during the implementation phase, you might ask, "Have you seen any real results with students yet?" Then follow that with: Which particular students? Do you see patterns in the kinds of situations in which the new approach is useful? We need to know if people are having any success using this strategy."

For this technique to work:

- Avoid taking notes as you would in a formal interview.
- Don't use this time to get "converts" to the project or to teach the content.
- Listen carefully to each person's impromptu remarks. Note patterns in what participants ask or suggest.
- Record the conversation as soon as possible so that you don't forget important parts; capture quotes or examples for your summary report.

Like many formative evaluation strategies, this one can also serve as a needs assessment strategy. Information gathered "in the stairwell" can help you steer the dialogue in next week's session or determine the next steps in the project's implementation.

10-MINUTE POP-IN VISITS

Ten-minute pop-in visits in classrooms can be golden as formative evaluation data. Observational data might, for example, be used in a beginning teachers' program to inform mentors on how well the training on "how to start class" has transferred. Pop-in visits might also help you determine if school improvement teams are using what they have learned about planning and conducting meetings using a shared leadership model. While summative evaluation demands objective, outside observers in order to be considered valid, formative evaluation can get valuable observational data using " inside" observers.

To increase the accuracy and credibility of 10-minute pop-in visits:

- Instruct all observers on how and what to record when they visit a classroom.
- Provide observers with a written example of the standard documentation technique so that all observers use similar coding or descriptions.
- Check often to ensure that all observers use the same standard in all classrooms, while also allowing for differences in contextual factors that influence teacher decisions.

10-MINUTE CASE STUDY PROBLEM OR TEST

Give the facilitator up to one minute to describe a situation and then allow 10 minutes for participants to respond with ideas.

Quick "case study problems" to be solved by participants as 10-minute exit tests help document what participants are learning. For example, you might be able to determine the percentage of participants who know how to apply the new information to a real school or classroom problem.

Warning: In most situations, participants do not expect to be tested as part of training so a test may be a "culture busting" activity. To help with this:

- Tell participants whether this kind of check for understanding will be a regular part of the program.
- Explain exactly how the responses will be used. If, for example, you intend to report the results to stakeholders, will you identify participants by name, school, or content area or will they be reported anonymously?
- State clearly if and when participants will see the "answer key" or get other feedback on their responses.

Psychological Association. Summative evaluation requires more resources (i.e. time, energy, funding, and expertise) than formative evaluation.

Summative evaluation is generally done to gather data to help policy makers and funders make critical decisions, especially after a program has been implemented. These evaluation studies usually summarize several kinds of evidence about program outcomes. They inform stakeholders of the extent to which a program achieved its intended outcomes. The data must be able to withstand scrutiny because they are often used to help make high stakes decisions, such as whether to continue, abolish, expand, or re-invent a program by people who are

TO LEARN MORE:

- **Your opinion, please! How to build the best questionnaires in the field of education** by James Cox. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc., 1996.
- **"Does your training make a difference? Prove it!"** by Beverly Geber, *Training,* March 1995, pages 27-34.
- **Evaluator's handbook** by Joan Herman, Lynn Morris, and Carol Fitz-Gibbon. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1997.
- **Another look at evaluating training programs** by Donald Kirkpatrick. Alexandria, VA: American Society for Training and Development, 1998.
- **Staff development programs: A guide to evaluation** by Terry Mullins. Thousand Oaks, CA.: Corwin Press, Inc., 1994.

Overcoming the evaluation hurdle needs to be priority.

not staff developers.

The road to quality professional development programs is filled with hurdles. Overcoming the evaluation hurdle needs to be priority. We can do that, at least in part, by building a culture in which we make monitoring and adjusting our programs on the basis of data an everyday part of the work. ■