

Program Evaluation Projects Promoting Authentic Learning

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Evaluation is a complex sub-process in an interactive program planning systems model, such as the one described by Caffarella (2002). Developing a useful evaluation for a program is arguably the most complex challenge for an adult education student because it demonstrates a thorough understanding of all the sub-processes. This paper is divided in two parts. The first part describes the use of a faculty- designed reusable learning object (RLO) for developing program evaluation in an online course focused on program planning. The faculty perspective focuses on the development and use of the RLO as demonstration of the scholarship of teaching and learning. The second part presents examples of useful evaluations as authentic projects developed in an online course. Tyrone Freeman describes his project, titled “Measuring Participant Satisfaction and Transfer of Learning: A Utilization-focused evaluation of the Indiana Chapter of Fundraising Professionals’ Half Day Spring Workshop.” Examples of other student projects using the RLO are also described briefly.

I. A Faculty Perspective on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL)

Merrill: The scholarship of teaching and learning describes an approach well known to adult educators: reflective practice. It is a process that engages the instructor in exploring, contemplating and analyzing what happens in the teaching-learning transaction. The strategies employed by faculty investigating the SOTL are often called powerful pedagogies or pedagogies of engagement. These include inquiry-based, learner-centered strategies that are fundamental to the teaching-learning transactions of adult educators in both the classroom and online delivery modes.

The SOTL encourages course-focused research projects defined and implemented by the instructor as part of a larger interdisciplinary community of learning and engagement. This community supports and enhances both the inquiry of individual faculty and contributes to the research documenting effective teaching. Rather than focusing on discipline specific issues or learning methods, the SOTL approach encourages exploration of many approaches and reflection on questions about student learning derived from the teaching-learning transaction in all delivery modes. Hutchings (2000) describes one approach as a developing taxonomy of questions about the teaching-learning transaction. The questions include: “What works?,” “What is happening?,” “What is possible?,” and “Does this lead me to a new model or conceptual framework to describe teaching and learning?”

One of my primary objectives as the facilitator of an online graduate course is to design learning events, based on a constructivist framework, to engage graduate students in more authentic learning by using real-world cases and problems. Some of the challenges of online courses, especially at the graduate level, which I find particularly stimulating and fun as an instructional designer are:

- 1) To engage the students with the course content via active learning strategies, especially since online courses tend to be heavily text-based;

- 2) To engage the students as active partners with shared responsibility for developing a collaborative learning experience;
- 3) To create the space for the “instructor of record” to be a facilitator and guide, in a constructivist learning experience, rather than purveyor of information (“talking/writing head”).

Description of the RLO

The RLO is an inquiry-based, interactive module created with Flash programming. The graphical structure and questions that focus this inquiry enable visual exploration of the utilization-focused evaluation process. The overall structure of the graduate course in which the evaluation RLO is incorporated is discussion-driven and delivered via Indiana University’s Oncourse course management system. Participants interact with the course facilitator through threaded bulletin boards, synchronous chat, and e-mail within Oncourse. The RLO structure leads the learner through the development of an evaluation plan with a specific utilization-focus as a demonstration of authentic learning. The RLO includes a set of questions on developing the evaluation process and an organized set of resources accessible from within the course that cover the knowledge and skills related to the module.

II. Student Perspective: Developing a Program Evaluation Process

Our purpose in this second section is to provide some examples of application of the RLO, in the spirit of Hutchings’ (2000) question: “What is happening?” Tyrone Freeman used the RLO to develop and evaluation project in a course focused on planning programs for adult learners. His project presents an overall description of one project. Following the description of Freeman’s project, there will be brief summaries of the ways two other students used the RLO to focus an evaluation process. The title of Freeman’s project described here is: “Measuring Participant Satisfaction and Transfer of Learning: A Utilization-focused evaluation of the Indiana Chapter of Fundraising Professionals’ Half Day Spring Workshop”

Purpose of the Evaluation

The purpose of this evaluation study was to assess the educational impact of the Indiana Chapter of the Association of Fundraising Professional’s Half Day Spring Workshop event. At the time of the study, the event was three years old and utilized a model that brought nationally-known fundraising speakers to Indianapolis to present practical content in an engaging and interactive style during a 3 hour session. A complimentary copy of the speaker’s book was always included for each participant. The program had experienced annual growth in attendance and net revenues, and was considered to be successful. Simultaneously, the chapter’s full day fall conference, which had been offered for more than a decade, was experiencing declining attendance and was losing money. So, there was a desire to assess the half-day program not only for its educational impact, but also for the purposes of learning how to improve the fall conference.

Although a “smile sheet” or participant satisfaction evaluation survey had been conducted each year, there was a lack of knowledge as to how useful and practical the workshop content had been for participants and whether or not they had transferred learning into their own professional practice. By using Patton’s Utilization-focused Evaluation (UFE) and Kirkpatrick’s Four Levels of Evaluation, the goal of this study was to develop and implement protocols to

better evaluate participant satisfaction and to begin evaluating transfer of learning. The study began in April 2005 and concluded in July 2005.

Importance to Practice of Adult Education

This evaluation study is extremely important to the practice of adult education, particularly within the continuing education and professional development contexts. Questions about the value and effectiveness of particular forms of training and the transfer of learning into practice continue to be of major concern to the field as a whole. Additionally, as the philanthropic sector expands and becomes more professionalized, it also wrestles with questions, such as: what type of training best prepares nonprofit professionals to effectively raise money; is there an optimal instructional design for facilitating transfer into fundraising practice? This is critical for both consumers and providers. Nonprofit organizations generally have limited resources to spend on professional development, so it is imperative that dollars and time be spent wisely.

Methodology

Patton described UFE as a collaborative approach for stakeholders to specifically define the uses, users, audiences, content, model, methods, etc. that will best capture the data and information desired. As a result, it does not advocate specific methods of data collecting. Rather, through a series of questions, it enables stakeholders to select the most appropriate form and method of evaluation after thoroughly understanding their intended use (1997). Kirkpatrick defined four types or levels of program evaluation: 1) reaction (customer/participant satisfaction); 2) learning; 3) behavior; and 4) results (1994). For the purposes of this evaluation study, levels one and three were most relevant.

This study merged the methods of UFE and Kirkpatrick's Four Levels to engage the workshop's planning committee in a process to assess participant satisfaction and transfer of learning. Specifically, the committee wanted to accomplish two things: 1) redesign and administer the "smile sheet" evaluation survey to assess participant satisfaction for the 2005 event (Kirkpatrick's level one reaction); and 2) survey a sample of 2004 participants by phone to measure transfer of learning (Kirkpatrick's level three learning).

The Indiana University Adult Education program's Reusable Learning Object on UFE was used to guide the workshop's planning committee through a process to determine the scope and type of evaluation that would be conducted. The committee's responses to the questions posed in the RLO were compiled and used to revise the participant survey and create the telephone survey. The committee reviewed and approved the instruments prior to administration.

The level one reaction survey was administered to all 110 participants at the close of the workshop in April 2005. This survey contained 16 questions that covered areas such as the content, speaker, facilities, potential speakers/topics for future workshops, participant demographics, and the overall value of the workshop. A total of 89 surveys were returned (81% response rate). The level three learning telephone survey was administered during July 2005 using an alphabetized list of 139 participants. It contained 12 questions covering four primary areas: the value of the book included with registration; the application of 3 recommendations made by the speaker; impact on dollars raised; and the overall value of the half day conference.

A total of 25 participants were successfully reached by phone and completed the survey (18% response rate).

Implications for practice

This study successfully used the methods of Patton and Kirkpatrick in a cost effective way to measure participant satisfaction and transfer of learning. The result was answers to the chapter's questions about the value, relevance, applicability of workshop content; the effectiveness of instruction; and the assessment of needs for future workshops. This study also identified barriers to the transfer of learning into practice. Consequently, a series of recommendations were developed which focused on strengthening the overall instructional design of the workshop to ensure practical content, participant engagement, and an interactive instructional style. A strong instructional design can facilitate transfer of learning by arranging and presenting content in an accessible way. It can also impact marketing of the event—when used to properly develop the messages to promote the workshop—that helps to shape participant expectations and ultimately impacts satisfaction. The chapter used the results of this study to affirm the half-day workshop program, and to redesign its fall full day conference based upon the successful half-day model.

Merrill: Descriptions of Other Student Evaluation Projects

In this brief paper there is not space to provide full descriptions of additional projects. In his project, Freeman described the centrality of the utilization-focused evaluation (UFE) process in the RLO. The following summaries of the focus sections from other students' projects provide a contrast to Freeman's focus and illustrate different outcomes of the UFE to guide an evaluation process.

For Freeman, the purpose of the evaluation study was to assess the educational impact of the Indiana Chapter of the Association of Fundraising Professional's Half Day Spring Workshop event. . . . [and] there was a desire to assess the half-day program not only for its educational impact, but also for the purposes of learning how to improve the fall conference. He further stated: "the goal of this study was to develop and implement protocols to better evaluate participant satisfaction and to begin evaluating transfer of learning."

In a project evaluating a leadership development workshop for women, L. B. (2006) defined her focus this way to one of the key questions embedded in the RLO:

What are the intended uses of your evaluation?

"It is a summative evaluation because the program is already operating and has been for five years. The intended uses are to examine program failures as well as program successes and recommendations for current and future programs. The key uses of this evaluation are as follows:

- To build support and utilize key people in the evaluation and remodel process as needed.
- To pretrain staff towards changes and revisions by involving them in the process. This will also help to keep staff focused on the goals and objectives of the ALC program.
- To explore ways to increase application of the learning by participants.
- To identify needed improvements in the design and delivery of the sessions.
- To increase program accountability."

Another example of defining the uses comes from a project by R. P. (2006). Her project was developing and evaluation process for the Customer Master Detail course that teaches the participant about the business process of creating customer records and the transactional input of data relevant to this activity.

What are the intended uses of your evaluation?

“Purpose of the evaluation is to determine the utility of the course as well as identify areas for improvement. This includes the response of the participants to the course as well as the ability of the participants to utilize the information from the course. This may mean implementation of quality controls to measure effectiveness.”

Each of these examples has evaluating some kind of a learning event as a very similar basic purpose. However, each one also elaborates different goals or uses for the evaluation. The scope of the process is greater in L. B.’s and in Freeman’s projects, when compared to the goal described by R. P. The utilization-focused evaluation process enables those responsible for planning and evaluation to effectively capture subtle variations of purpose and use. The RLO has embedded a specific set of questions that helps students work through the process to develop useful products as demonstrations of authentic learning.

Discussion

Merrill: The purpose of this paper has been two-fold. The first was to describe the scholarship of teaching and learning as a useful framework for examining and reflecting on the teaching-learning transaction as adult educators. The SOTL perspective is one that is very much congruent with our practice. The development of the Evaluation RLO and its use in the online graduate course focused on adult education planning has been a stimulating process for me during the last three years. This paper presented an opportunity to take a step back from the process and ask the question, from a SOTL perspective: What’s working here?

The second purpose of this paper focused on the “What’s working here?” question. Tyrone Freeman agreed to share a description of his experience in using the RLO to develop a successful evaluation process for a learning community that provides professional development for fund raising. This example has been supplemented by two other brief examples of developing a utilization-focused evaluation using the inquiry-based RLO. My tentative conclusion after using this RLO in two courses, is that the set of questions embedded in the RLO that guide the students’ inquiry to develop an evaluation process does seem to produce a useful product. An important next piece of action research would be to follow the processes developed in 2006 by R. P. and L. B. to learn if their outcomes were as useful as Freeman’s were in 2005.

It also important to think about the use of the graphical structure provided by Flash-based technology to determine if it is effective as a guide to inquiry and not just a novelty. Ross and Lukow (2004) provide this encouragement: “New technological innovations will provide instructors and students alike with tremendous opportunities to enhance student learning. Instructors must make these technologies available to all students by providing a number of different learning options that take into account a variety of learning styles.” This is a justification of using tools like the Evaluation RLO in the teaching-learning transaction. However, in the next sentence they remind us: “If instructors simply use these technologies

because they are unique and exciting, sound and effective pedagogical principles that should provide the basis of all instruction are completely ignored” (p. 51).

Here is one final reminder of how complex and difficult the evaluation process can be in this observation by R. P. about how important it is to keep the focus connected with the stakeholders, the people for whom it should have the most meaning and use: “The outcome of this project, beyond the beginnings of actual development of a reaction and learning evaluation and the beginning of program design, was the realization that the evaluation process must be the result of the input of many stakeholders. The stakeholder involvement was the most tiresome, yet rewarding experience associated with this project. “

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