

Evaluation Matters: A Team Hybrid Course or Have Your Cake and Eat It Too

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Introduction

Evaluation Matters is an educational program by the Minnesota Youth Work Institute for staff of youth serving agencies to teach skills in program evaluation. It is a long-term technical assistance project, giving program teams (2-7 people) information, skills, and hands-on support in developing and implementing evaluation tools that will allow them to evaluate their own programs. The project includes four face-to-face sessions, eight online synchronous sessions, asynchronous support and up to six hours of individual hands-on consultation per participating team. The success of the program hinges on distance delivery while maintaining face-to-face contact within local teams. Online participation does not preclude simultaneous face-to-face participation within local teams.

Background

The Minnesota Youth Work Institute is a branch of the Center for Youth Development within the University of Minnesota's Extension Service. In addition to evaluation, its programs address culturally responsive youth work, developing quality non-formal programs as well as other general youth work topics. Extension, as one of the legs of the Land Grant University system, is charged with applying the research of the university to needs in communities. The Youth Work Institute initially targeted mainly Twin Cities Metro area clientele. Having become established as the go-to place in the metro area for research based information on positive youth development; it is expanding its reach to Greater Minnesota. The Evaluation Matters program was previously held only as a face-to-face class in the Twin Cities metro area where the group would meet several hours each week for several months. This model could not work in rural areas of the state due to the sparse distribution of the targeted audience. An online model was needed. However, online learning situations are often difficult for learners who prefer the social aspects of a face-to-face class and especially to a generation of learners for whom technology is still a challenge. Many people in rural areas, having recently received high-speed internet, are still unfamiliar with the technology used for online learning. The format used for the Minnesota Youth Work Institute's evaluation training program utilized hybrid methods and local teams of learners to overcome these and other obstacles.

Program Background

Evaluation in formal education settings has become a fine science. Professionals entering teaching careers have formal preparation in the development of tests to establish academic progress. An industry and national policy exists to support teachers in their efforts to establish outcomes in reading, math and science. However, an increasing body of research (Granger, 2009. Gambone, Klem & Connell, 2002. Mahoney, 2000. McLaughlin, Irby & Langman, 1994.) points to the importance of the time young people spend in community setting to their long-term development. The professionals and volunteers that work with young people in these settings rarely have any training at all in outcome evaluation. Yet funders and other program stakeholders require evaluation from programs and, in today's competitive environment, the programs themselves need evaluation data in order to survive. The Youth Work Institute's Evaluation Matters program was started in order fill this gap.

Programs that have taken part in Evaluation Matters represent a range of non-formal community offerings for young people including mentoring programs, after-school day care, cultural awareness programs, as well as several prevention based programs dealing with substances abuse, violence and homelessness among youth. What all programs share is engaging youth in solving the problems of their community themselves.

Course/Delivery Outline

The program spans twelve weeks and a total of approximately 30 hours of face-to-face and online synchronous instruction with asynchronous and technical assistance components.

The four onsite classes are spaced with two early in the twelve weeks, one in the middle and one at the end. Onsite events tend to be held at transition points in the curriculum including getting to know participants and their programs at the beginning or the introduction of new topics throughout the program. Capitalization of the opportunity to share hardcopy materials and to socialize is important during these face-to-face sessions.

One and a half hour online synchronous sessions via Adobe Connect are split between instruction and team reports. An attempt is made for each team to report on its progress during each online session. Teams are able to post material via either PowerPoint or screen-share for group comment and discussion. A MOODLE (or Ning) are set up primarily as a repository for materials needed by groups to do their work. It is also a place to post class announcements. Technical assistance time between the facilitators and individual teams is done face-to-face, if convenient, but more often via Adobe Connect.

At every stage, teams ranging in size from two to five work together face-to-face. The delivery method assumes that organizations are not able to afford an outside evaluator or to have one of their own people assigned full evaluation responsibilities. The purpose of the team in early renditions of Evaluation Matters was to provide a base of evaluation expertise across all levels of the organization. Responsibilities are spread out. The loss of one person to job changes does not doom the organization's evaluation program. This was similarly important in the hybrid approach but the team also became important in maintaining a face-to-face presence for the program. This was important due to the lack of exposure to distance education among the audience and even to a lack of ability in basic computer skills. One team had difficulty just using a conference phone. Yet as a team they figured it out. An individual on one of the teams struggled with making a data table using Word. (She was still entering data using typewriter technique and was unaware of Word's table function.) Yet with support from her teammates, she later made significant and important contributions to a MOODLE based wiki. During webinar presentations site specific technical issues were dealt with as a group. The one program that enrolled without a team, enrolling only one person, failed to complete evaluation instruments or an evaluation plan. She was eighty miles from the next nearest participant and her participation waned as the program progressed.

The amount of driving not required was also important. The first attempt at the hybrid team approach was based in St. Cloud, MN which is located at the approximate geographical center of the state. None of the six participating teams were from St. Cloud and all had to drive. The closest participating team came from 63 miles away and the team driving the farthest for the four face-to-face classes drove 190 miles one way. All were willing to make their respective drives for just the four full-day face-to-face sessions spread out over four months because the bulk of the program was delivered synchronously via webinar and asynchronously via MOODLE.

Online synchronous discussion is also facilitated as those that might be reluctant to voice questions or share observations seem more willing to do so when their comments come from the group and not from individuals.

Conclusion

The team learning format was a given with the Evaluation Matters program. Publicity called for teams. Registration was done as a team. Assignments assumed teams. Wherever this is possible it easily facilitates face-to-face interaction among team members while much of the delivery is happening online. What of programs where participation is individual? In those cases consideration might be given to creating small groups within a neighborhood, community or institution. In a statewide effort to train volunteers, could small groups of volunteers be convened at somebody's home or at a public meeting venue? Could groups of students meet at their respective campuses for online classes generated from a remote site? Done well, doing so creates communities of learners within the larger online educational effort. Granted, there could be a cost in time and other resources in facilitating face-to-face groupings, however experience from the Evaluation Matters program suggests the costs may be well worth it.

On one hand, it seems that creating space for small group face-to-face work may be a step backwards in distance learning efforts. However, as educators, we must keep in mind that not all the participants in our programs are ready to learn online. Creating opportunities for small groups to participate together is a bridge from traditional face-to-face formats to full online participation.

References

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Author Summary

Eric Vogel has worked with youth and with adults who work with youth both professionally and as a volunteer in his community. He is an Extension Educator with the University of Minnesota Extension's Youth Work Institute and is based at a U of MN Extension Regional Office in St. Cloud, MN. The Youth Work Institute supports the education, training, and professional development of adults who work with and on behalf of young people in non-formal settings. Vogel led the institute's first efforts to move its programs to online formats.

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