Learning About Program Evaluation by Doing Program Evaluation: Development and Delivery of a Graduate Course about Program Evaluation

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Abstract: *Courses focusing on theory without consideration of praxis fail to engage the learner in the methods essential to program evaluation. Assuming that the way to learn is by doing, a new approach was taken so that all course elements focused on the program evaluation that each student was doing. This is what distinguished this course from more traditional program evaluation courses.*
Keywords: *program evaluation, course development, college teaching*

Leaders are continually confronted with questions about best practices in their organizations and ways to increase production and overall efficiency. They and others also ask questions about whether a selected approach is effective and makes a difference in terms of the desired outcomes. Understanding and using frameworks, concepts, and tools from the discipline of program evaluation (PE) can be of great assistance in answering quality, efficiency and effectiveness questions.

According to McDavid, Huse, and Hawthorn (2013), "[p]rogram evaluation is intended to be a flexible and situation-specific means of answering program questions, testing hypotheses, and understanding program processes and outcomes...[which is] intended to yield information that reduces the level of uncertainty about the issues that prompted the evaluation (p. 412).

Understanding evaluation paradigms and methodologies can help leaders form and decide on the most important questions, identify the sources of evidence that need to be obtained, and weigh interpretations of evidence and statement of findings so that they are well grounded and most informative. Without this knowledge, leaders run the risk of making ill-informed decisions about which practices are making a difference. Having evaluation evidence can help make the case for implementing and sustaining the use of practices that are making a positive difference.

For prospective education leaders, how best to learn about PE methods can be a challenge. A traditional, didactic college course that focuses solely on theory without consideration of praxis fails to engage the learner in the methods and processes essential to program evaluations. That is why Gene Hall, co-author of this article, developed a new approach in a graduate-level PE course at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. This article describes that course by presenting the instructor's unique perspective and then explicates the critical elements of the course to show how they interact to result in the desired goal of learning

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PE by doing a PE study. We argue that the value of this approach is that it engages students in the actual process of learning by doing something that is missing from more conventional PE courses.

INSTRUCTOR'S PERSPECTIVE

The fundamental premise of the course is that developing knowledge about and skill in conducting PE studies requires more than academic study of the discipline and reviewing past studies. The way to learn is by doing. Therefore, the primary frame of reference for lectures, readings, class discussions, and assignments is the program evaluation that each student is doing. Topics and the flow of the course parallel the steps that are taken to negotiate, develop, conduct, analyze and report a program evaluation study.

By the end of the course it is expected that the students will have developed an understanding of frameworks, strategies and uses for program evaluation models, tools and reports. Participants also will be able to analyze implications and applications of program evaluation studies for leadership. Leaders are the ones making decisions about continuing, improving and whether, or not, there are meaningful differences in program inputs, efficiencies, outputs and ultimately outcomes.

COURSE DESIGN AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

The basic course design is around four critical, but interrelated elements. The first is exposure to core knowledge about the conceptual frameworks for PE models and the theoretical underpinnings. In addition, ethical considerations are introduced. The second includes learning more about the key activities involved in PE including client relations and the political realities. Third is analysis and critique of published program evaluation studies as well as the analysis of actual program evaluation studies conducted by the instructor. The fourth element is each student's project, which requires that they negotiate, design, implement, and present an actual PE study of a program in a real-world setting.

Class periods include time for review and reflection to check for understanding of the topics presented and to monitor student progress on their individual PE studies. Material about the conceptual frameworks and key PE activities are presented in class using traditional pedagogical methods.

There also is an ethical component that program evaluators and their clients must continually keep in mind. Of particular note are the Program Evaluation Standards established by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (Yarbrough, Shulha, Hopson, & Caruthers, 2011).

By the end of this course it is expected that the students will have developed an understanding of frameworks, strategies and uses for PE models, tools and reports. Students also will be able to analyze implications and applications of PE studies for leadership, inasmuch as the leaders will be the ones making decisions about continuing, improving, and whether or not there are meaningful differences in program inputs, efficiencies, outputs and ultimately outcomes.

Throughout the course there are references to *leaders*. Those conducting PE studies have leadership responsibilities. Those commissioning and those using the results of PE studies have leadership responsibilities. Therefore students of PE should come to appreciate that effective and strategic leadership is:

- more than completing administrative tasks.

- about action, not position.
- about learning; it's not about adhering to procedures.
- complex, multi-faced, and demanding.
- evidence-based.
- about asking questions.
- based in collecting data and using evidence to guide decision making.
- about developing and maintaining an organization or community culture where learning is the number one priority.
- about becoming a continuous learner.
- reflective about ones practice in order to improve performance.

SELECTED KEY TOPICS

There are several topics that tend to be under-emphasized or not mentioned in the available textbooks and in general discussions about program evaluation. The following are some of the most salient:

- How are PE and research the same and different? Most of the students have had at least an introductory research methods course and some will have had one or more statistics courses. A few will have had a qualitative methods course. Discussion around this question usually leads to a number of important insights.
- In PE there is a client. This makes for a very different stance. Unlike researchers, program evaluators are not out to answer their own questions. The client's purpose and questions are the focus.
- Negotiations with the client are central. Most clients will have a good idea of what the PE study should find. Turning this agenda into a responsible PE study begins with dialogue and ultimately coming to consensus about the study questions.
- Personal style and listening are important keys to the study. A challenge in PE studies is to listen and use skills such as perception checking to develop understanding of the client's purpose and to come to agreement on study questions, design and final report.
- Evaluators need to be knowledgeable about a wide variety of research designs and methods. Program evaluators need to have depth of knowledge about study designs, different sources of data, and design of measures.
- PE study designs are seldom perfect. Rarely will it be possible to have an experimental design with random assignment and pre-post testing.
- PE data are likely to be messy. Most of the time sample selection and collecting data in ways that are affordable are based in compromises - sometimes major -that result in less than pure controlling of variables.
- PE reports may not tell the entire story. As with all parts of PE, what is presented in the report and even how it is stated is open to judgment. These judgments need to be consistent with standards, responsible and ethical.
- Standards and ethics are critical. Program evaluators will have access to inside information and issues that are sensitive and most likely outside the mission of the PE study. Adherence to the national standards for PE is critical and must be maintained at all times.

COURSE DELIVERABLES AND THE FINAL PE REPORT

The main deliverables from the students are the study plan, the memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the client, the PE study report, and its in-class presentation. Examples of PE studies by the students included strategies for improving student support services at the College of Southern Nevada Office of Student Retention (Keller, 2012), Lee Early College High School's Online Credit Recovery Program (Nourse, 2012), and UNLV's Hybrid Learning Program (Wilder, 2012). The format and design of a program evaluation report is flexible, but it must address each of the study questions. Most importantly, the report needs to offer recommendations. Frequently evaluation reports provide a great deal of data, analyses and findings, but no recommendations. It is critical for students to understand the client deserves recommendations from the PE report. They may not use any of them. They may not even agree with some. However, the program evaluator has developed intimate knowledge about the program as well as the context within which it is being used. Failure to share insights and suggestions for client consideration make the whole effort much less valuable.

Following the completion of the final PE report, the students are required to write a reflective "epilogue" about their experience and learning at the conclusion of their project. In this reflection, the students also are expected to say something about how well their reports were accepted by their clients.

SUMMARY

Based on the quality of the final PE reports submitted by the students and the content of their reflective "epilogue", the students participating in this course have demonstrated the skills required to conceptualize and execute an actual program evaluation for their clients. We would argue that the learning by doing approach to program evaluation has been validated by a successful final report, which meets professional standards, and is well received for its usefulness by the client.

We have found very little in the extant literature dealing with alternative approaches to organizing and delivering program evaluation courses. Several themes tend to emerge from the literature. Very little has been reported in relation to approaches to learning program evaluation. What publications there are go back in time and cover several decades. There are suggested topics including limited descriptions of short courses. One early proposal was the use of simulations. The course described in this article moves beyond an in-class simulation and takes the students into the real work of program evaluation.

One of the positive outcomes from the course is students having conducted studies and prepared reports that have been well received by their clients. Another valuable outcome has been many students presenting and publishing their reports in various professional settings.

Given the complexities and the nuances entailed in conducting PE studies, the experience has convinced the course instructor that the best way to learn about program evaluation is by doing program evaluation. Most certainly, there are intense personal aspects and the work can be messy. But all of this is real world. Also, as all of us get better at doing program evaluations we will figure out even better ways to contribute to improving products, processes, outputs and ultimately outcomes.

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