

a self-reporting evaluation tool

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Extension is ever-more-pointedly facing the challenge of generating high quality documentation of the exact impact of its educational programs. As Steele and others have pointed out, this challenge is quite complex and seems to defy simple, across-the-board-type solutions.¹ Yet, in field situations, usability and practicality are directly related to simplicity of implementation. Olson and Fruin, in pointing out that "evaluation doesn't have to be difficult," have recently shared two very usable approaches to educational evaluation in informal settings.² Building on this existing foundation of information, the present article is an attempt to at once embrace both simplicity and sophistication, and to do so in a very practical way.

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Basic Evaluation Questions

A review of frequently used immediate-post-program and follow-up evaluation techniques shows that one or more of five basic questions form the core of most of these approaches:

1. Was the program beneficial/enjoyable?
2. What was learned?
3. Has it changed your life for the better?
4. If so, exactly how?
5. Are there recommendations for future sessions?

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An analysis of educational effectiveness would focus primarily on questions 2, 3, and 4.

**Need for
Consistent
Instrument**

Though many evaluation efforts deal with these questions, the questions are asked and answered in a variety of ways and therefore lack consistency across populations and across time. This seemingly innocent lack of consistency destroys our ability to make comparison statements both within and between subject-matter areas, programs, geographical sectors, and specific target populations. Considering the number of educational contacts made in Extension, by sampling technique alone, effective evaluation could be relatively simple, pleasant, and rewarding—but *only* if the same yardstick were used in all evaluations. *What's needed, as one important component of an overall evaluation system, is the development and widespread use of an effective, consistent, flexible, basic, and simple evaluative yardstick.*

**Attitude and
Behavior
Change**

Above and beyond the numbers and characteristics of the people we "reach," what type of program effectiveness evidence is Extension accountable for? Also, what types of data are both vital to and common across seemingly diverse program areas such as home economics, 4-H, agriculture, and community development?

As with measuring the impact of nearly all educational systems, two of the most essential types of information needed are: (1) the extent of positive attitudinal change effected by a specific educational program (*Have the clientele learned to perceive, think, and believe in ways that enhance the quality of their lives?*) and (2) the degree of positive overt behavioral change as a result of a particular program (*What are people actually doing differently that is making their lives better?*).

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Evaluation showing positive attitudinal change and positive overt behavioral change is often missing in informal educational efforts, particularly in those subject-matter areas that tend to be less than very tangible. Both attitude and overt behavior are vital parts of overall human behavior. One excellent way to document the existence of behavioral change is to observe directly and objectively a person and see if he/she

engages in positively changed behavioral patterns. For Extension educators to undertake such behavioral observations is, generally speaking, highly impractical. Probably the most feasible alternative is to base evaluation of educational efforts largely on self-report.

Power of Self-Observation

As a method of collecting data, self-observation holds the potentially serious disadvantage of possible bias measurement. What we often fail to realize, however, is that by logic of the Heisenberg Principle of Uncertainty, so-called "objective measurement"—the primary alternative to self-report—has its own built-in bias.³ Moreover, behavioral research on the reliability and validity of "highly controlled scientific studies" has raised serious questions concerning the measurement distortion generated by the difficult control variables of "demand characteristics" and experimenter bias and effect.⁴ The point is twofold: (1) the primary alternatives to self-observation have their own measurement limitations and (2) self-observation is a very respectable and potent research tool that doesn't merit the inferior status that it's often given.

Self-observation/report possesses many methodological assets. For example, not only is self-report usually easy, quick, and relatively inexpensive, but it also involves the learner in observing his/her behavior patterns. Due to this involvement, the possibilities of positive behavioral change are enhanced.⁵

Also, self-report emphasizes viewing learning from the vantage point of the learner, a strategy of importance in adult education where self-satisfaction on the part of the learner is a major determinant in the success of educational programs. Moreover, when we start assessing attitude change, self-report is one of the most accurate forms of measurement we can make.

Core Instrument

The two-phase instrument we are suggesting, called "Helping Us Serve You Better," is a basic tool for general use. Since it's a simple, short, "core" instrument, an evaluator is always free to "piggyback" or build in additional evaluation items designed to gather specific information. *In this way, a great deal of flexibility coexists with a core of consistency.*

Two-Phase Evaluation Tool

Phase I (Figure 1) is an immediate post-session feedback instrument and Phase II (Figure 2) is a mail-out, follow-up questionnaire. The two-part tool was designed: (1) to be very simple, (2) to ask the five previously identified core evaluation questions, and (3) to elicit self-observation

"HELPING US SERVE YOU BETTER"

Completing this *will only take a few minutes. Please be brief, to-the-point, and honest.* We need your negative comments as well as your positive ones. *Your name is not required.* We sincerely appreciate your help.

Date: _____ Age: _____ under 21 _____ 41-50
Sex: male/female _____ 21-30 _____ 51-60
County: _____ _____ 31-40 _____ over 60

1. Please rate this program by circling one number.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
POOR -----OUTSTANDING

2. Briefly mention what you liked best.

3. What would you like to see improved?

4. (a) What's the most important thing you learned from this program?

(b) How do you plan to use it?

5. Participating in this program has been very worthwhile:^a ____ Yes ____ No

6. Exactly what types of educational programs would you like to see Extension offer in the future? Please be specific.

THANK YOU!

^aAn interesting twist on this question: "Do you think this program has been well worth \$_____ (need to use soundly based estimate) of your tax money? YES _____ NO _____" generates, simple, yet powerful, data that, for example, public officials can easily relate to.

Figure 1. Phase I—Immediate post-session instrument.

evidence showing the existence or nonexistence of relatively lasting attitudinal and overt behavioral change of a positive nature.

The small circle and square that appear at the top left of both the Phase I and Phase II forms are for coding purposes. It's recommended that the type of program (special interest, leader training, etc.) be coded in the circle and the session leader (volunteer, agent, etc.) be coded in the square.

"HELPING US SERVE YOU BETTER"

We are interested in whether what you learned at the _____ has proven helpful. Please take a few minutes (now, if possible) to answer the brief questions that follow. Return your answers *as soon as convenient* by using the enclosed envelope which *does not require a postage stamp*. *Your name or signature is not needed*. *Please be very honest*. We sincerely appreciate your help.

Date: _____ Age: _____ under 21 _____ 41-50
Sex: male/female _____ 21-30 _____ 51-60
County: _____ _____ 31-40 _____ over 60

1. As a direct result of this program has your attitude (or way of looking at things) changed for the better? Circle one: YES NO
Please explain:

2. As a direct result of this program have you *done*, or are you *doing*, anything differently that you consider an improvement?
Circle one: YES NO
Please explain and be as *specific* as possible.

THANK YOU!

Figure 2. Phase II—Follow-up questionnaire.

To anyone even slightly sophisticated in evaluation procedures, it's quite obvious that this two-phase evaluation process is neither complicated nor particularly innovative. However, it's precisely because of its refreshing simplicity that such an instrument can lend itself to broad-based use across subject matter, geographical areas, target audiences, and time.

Tool's Advantages

The two-part "Helping Us Serve You Better" instrument combines simplicity, practicality, and sophistication. Among its many advantages are the following:

- Easy to use.
- Takes very little time.
- Yields high quality information useful at report time.
- Suitable for a wide range of educational programs.
- Documents through self-report both attitude and behavior change.
- Only a sample of programs need be evaluated, and only a sample of participants need be involved.

- Generates specific data as well as open-end responses.
- Is a short "core" instrument. The evaluator can easily build in additional items designed to generate specific data pertaining to various programs.
- Allows for many easy and practical comparisons. For example, program effectiveness can be graphed against age, sex, subject matter, time of year, county, and so forth.

Summary

We've outlined a highly practical, flexible, and widely applicable evaluation tool that possesses the much-demanded twin attributes of simplicity and sophistication.

This two-phase core instrument is based on the scientific method of self-observation. It measures the degree of relatively lasting attitudinal and overt behavioral change effected by a given educational sequence, and taps the power of sampling. When consistently used, the technique affords the ability to make helpful comparison statements on program quality—both within and between various subject-matter areas, geographical sectors, and specific target populations.

Footnotes

1. Sara Steele, "An Emerging Concept of Program Evaluation," *Journal of Extension*, XIII (March/April, 1975), 13-22 and Claude Bennett, "Up the Hierarchy," *Journal of Extension*, XIII (March/April, 1975), 7-12.
2. Robert P. Olson and Marjorie F. Fruin, "Evaluation Doesn't Have To Be Difficult," *Journal of Extension*, XVII (March/April, 1979), 21-25.
3. Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1963).
4. M. T. Orne, "On the Social Psychology of the Psychology Experiment: With Particular Reference to Demand Characteristics and Their Implications," *American Psychologist*, XVII (November, 1962), 776-83, T. X. Barber and M. J. Silver, "Fact, Fiction, and the Experimenter Bias Effect," *Psychological Bulletin*, LXX (December, 1968), 6, Part 2, and P. Kessel and K. L. Barber, "Experimenter-Subject Interaction in Verbal Conditioning: Review of the Literature," *Psychological Reports*, XII (February, 1968), 59-74.
5. Carl Thoresen and Michael Mahoney, *Behavioral Self-Control* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1974).