ED376998 1994-11-00 Improving Evaluation in Experiential Education. ERIC Digest.

ERIC Development Team

www.eric.ed.gov

Table of Contents

If you're viewing this document online, you can click any of the topics below to link directly to that section.

ERIC Identifier: ED376998
Publication Date: 1994-11-00
Author: Hendricks, Bruce
Source: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools Charleston WV.

Improving Evaluation in Experiential Education. ERIC Digest.

Although experiential education is really the oldest approach to learning, its practitioners have not had an easy time justifying its relevance in the educational world of the twentieth century. Experiential educators promote learning through participation, reflection, and application to situations of consequence (Hunt, 1990, pp. 119-128). Although its practitioners are convinced of the effectiveness of this approach, skepticism persists outside the field.

In current usage, "assessment" is perhaps the general term, referring most often to an examination of the processes and contexts that influence learning (Eisner, 1993). "Evaluation" (a word that indicates estimation of value or worth) is increasingly used to estimate the worth of the results of a program or activity.

Recent changes in the methodologies of evaluation, however, have provided useful tools for experiential educators. Such tools can be used to refine programming, enhance student learning, and perhaps improve the credibility of the field--important when organizations compete for limited funding (Bennet, 1988; Flor, 1991).

NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION

Though new developments in evaluation are critical for the future of experiential education, almost 40 years of assessment and evaluation have shown that many experiential and outdoor education programs are effective in positively impacting individuals and society. Demonstrated effects include enhanced self-concept, reduced rates of recidivism, and effectiveness in treating chemical dependency (Ewert, 1989). During this time, however, much has changed in educational assessment and evaluation, including both the questions asked and the methods used to answer them. Researchers have, in recent years, finally begun to appreciate the complexity of the educational process. Learning is no longer considered largely a matter of organizing appropriate sets of stimuli and responses, nor is the mind still viewed as an impenetrable "black box." Instead, much greater appreciation prevails for the role that learners take in actively constructing their own learning.

Educators (from practitioners to theorists) are giving up the idea that they can dissect, predict, and control learning with technological precision. As a result, qualitative approaches to assessment and evaluation are becoming more common, usually in addition to--and even in place of--quantitative approaches. Robottom (1989, p. 430) argues that "researchers tend to study only what they can measure: educational research is the art of the measurable." The use of multiple methods helps address this problem by providing an assortment of tools, not all of which need to be measurement focused.

While evaluation methods in the past did an adequate job of providing evidence of the

effectiveness of experiential learning techniques (e.g., Cason & Gillis, 1994), the current challenge is to develop methods that will help answer questions about how experiential education works, including the transfer of experiential learning to other contexts. Future evaluation efforts should build on what is already known, rather than limit itself to replicating well-established methods and findings (Ewert, 1989).

Eisner (1993, pp. 226-232) presents one influential new framework for evaluation, consisting of "eight criteria in search of practice." These criteria are, in fact, consistent with the premises of experiential education programs. According to Eisner, evaluation tasks should:

- (1) reflect real world needs, by increasing students' problem-solving abilities and ability to construe meaning;
- (2) reveal how students solve problems, not just the final answer, since reasoning determines students' ability to transfer learning;
- (3) reflect values of the intellectual community from which the tasks are derived, thus providing a context for learning and enhancing retention, meaning, and aesthetic appreciation;
- (4) not be limited to solo performances, since much of life requires an ability to work in cooperation with others;
- (5) allow more than one way to do things or more than one answer to a question, since real-life situations rarely have only one correct alternative;
- (6) promote transference by presenting tasks that require students to intelligently adapt modifiable learning tools;

(7) require students to display an understanding of the whole, not just the parts; and

(8) allow students to choose a form of response with which they are comfortable.

ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL

As with Eisner's criteria, evaluation methods must stress both appropriateness and versatility so that they are consistent with the needs and context of the evaluation (Eisner, 1993; Robottom, 1989). Moreover, the reliability, clarity, and usefulness of findings are usually improved if the evaluator engages "methodological pluralism"--the use of more than one evaluation method (Eisner, 1993; Ewert, 1987). For example, a naturalistic (qualitative) inquiry method may be used to find out what participants see as significant in their experiences, whereas a rationalistic (quantitative) approach might be more appropriate to assess the relationship between demographics and enrollment within the same review.

INCREASED COLLABORATION BETWEEN EVALUATORS AND PRACTITIONERS

Good evaluation also depends on improving relationships between practitioners and evaluators. The two groups have not always understood one another.
Planning. For example, researchers working in an evaluative role have often produced findings related more to theory testing than to decision making. Such results hold little value for most practitioners. Practitioners, in their turn, have frustrated evaluators with their concern to establish the value of individual programs, rather than understanding the need for evaluations with a broader focus, which might benefit the larger field of experiential education (Ewert, 1987).

If practitioners and evaluators work collaboratively during the planning stages of an evaluation, the quality of evaluation design and the applicability of findings will almost certainly improve. It is at this foundational level where teams can develop data-gathering methods and terms of reference (objectives) that recognize the particular needs and interests of both groups (Hendricks & Cooney, 1992).

Communicating findings. In addition to planning, it is important for evaluators and practitioners to collaborate in communicating and applying evaluation findings. According to Stahl (1991, p. 293), "One frequent criticism of educational research [and evaluation] is its remoteness from educational practice." Several reasons have been suggested for the poor exchange of information between the two groups:

* Practitioners rarely read educational research and evaluation journals because jargon, technical language, and use of statistics render this literature inaccessible to them (Stahl, 1991; Ewert, 1987).

* Some evaluators are interested only in results that can be measured quickly and easily. Such an approach ensures more rapid publication, an important concern of those pursuing academic careers. But such an approach must sidestep many questions of educational relevance. Therefore, studies conducted on this basis are apt to yield little in the way of relevant, applicable knowledge for practitioners (Stahl, 1991).

* Many evaluations are designed and the results reported in ways that either confuse or intimidate practitioners or make it difficult for them to modify programs (Stahl, 1991).

Some evaluators have addressed this issue by designing delivery formats specifically to increase understanding and application by practitioners. Stahl (1991) found that packaging his evaluation findings in the form of an illustrated and annotated report (combined with the form of a training manual) allowed practitioners and researchers alike to benefit from its content. Stahl identified several major impediments that keep evaluation findings from being read. For each of these difficulties, he developed a response intended to increase readers' interest and ease of use.

********** ****IMPEDIMENT

Fear of figures and statistical tables

RESPONSE

An introduction to the findings in which readers are expressly told they do not need to read any of the statistical tables. Instead they can read the main findings in words at the bottom of each table.

IMPEDIMENT

Obscurity

RESPONSE

The use of a simple, straightforward language avoiding the use of jargon and technical terms. In places where special terms must be used, they are explained.

IMPEDIMENT

Abstractness

RESPONSE

Tables illustrated with concrete examples, such as passages taken from interviews in the study.

IMPEDIMENT

Dryness

RESPONSE

The inclusion of cartoons, jokes, proverbs, and quotations to provide illustrations of findings and how they might be applied.

********** ********

CONCLUSIONEvaluators and practitioners are striving to improve the future of experiential education through innovative and practical approaches to educational evaluation. There is much to do and much room for improvement. New evaluation methods, increased collaboration, and creative methods of disseminating findings are some of the important processes underway. In "Experience and Education," published in 1938, John Dewey commented that, in most cases, schooling stood in the way of learning. In order to make intellectual progress, he noted, we mostly have to unlearn what we learned in school.

Our goal as experiential educators is not just to help people learn differently but to help them learn better. Continuing improvements in evaluation can help us toward that goal.

REFERENCES

Bennet, D. B. (1988). Four steps to evaluating environmental education learning experiences. Journal of Environmental Education, 20(2), 14-21.
Cason, D., & Gillis, H. (1994). A meta-analysis of outdoor adventure programming with adolescents. Journal of Experiential Education, 17(1), 40-47.

Dewey, J. (1938). Experience and Education. New York: Collier Books.

Eisner, E. W. (1993). Reshaping assessment in education: Some criteria in search of practice. Journal of Curriculum Studies, 25(3), 219-233.

Ewert, A. W. (1989). Outdoor Adventure Pursuits: Foundations, Models and Theories. Columbus, OH: Publishing Horizons, Inc.

Ewert, A. (1987). Research in experiential education: An overview. Journal of Experiential Education, 10(2), 4-7.

Flor, R. (1991). An introduction to research and evaluation in practice. Journal of Experiential Education, 14(1), 36-39.

Hendricks, B., & Cooney, D. (1992). Charting the future: Program review and evaluation as tools for growth. In G. Hanna (Ed.), Celebrating our tradition, charting our future: Proceedings of the 1992 Association for Experiential Education Conference (pp.

249-259). Boulder, CO: Association for Experiential Education. (ED 353 122)

Hunt, J. S. (1991). Philosophy of adventure education. In Miles, J. C., & Priest, S. (Eds.) Adventure Education. State College, PA: Venture Publishing, Inc.

Robottom, I. (1989). Social critique or social control: Some problems for evaluation in environmental education. Journal of Research in Science Teaching, 26(5), 435-443.

Stahl, A. (1991). Bridging the gap between research and teacher education: An Israeli innovation. Journal of Education for Teaching, 17(30), 293-299.

Bruce Hendricks teaches in the Faculty of Kinesiology (Outdoor Pursuits Program) at the University of Calgary in Alberta, Canada.

This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. RR93002012. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI, the Department, or AEL.

—

Title: Improving Evaluation in Experiential Education. ERIC Digest.
Document Type: Information Analyses---ERIC Information Analysis Products (IAPs) (071); Information Analyses---ERIC Digests (Selected) in Full Text (073);
Available From: ERIC/CRESS, P.O. Box 1348, Charleston, WV 25325-1348 (free).
Descriptors: Educational Assessment, Educational Cooperation, Evaluation Methods, Evaluation Problems, Evaluators, Experiential Learning, Interprofessional Relationship, Program Evaluation, Research and Development, Student Evaluation, Theory Practice Relationship
Identifiers: ERIC Digests, Teacher Researcher Cooperation
###

—

[Return to ERIC Digest Search Page]