

The Purposes of Evaluation

Is Anybody Learning Anything Out There?

Evaluation is shot through with issues of power, responsibility, sensitivity, and even personal taste. You already know a great deal about evaluation, because you make judgments every day. However, everyone who wishes to study evaluation must first grapple with important and fundamental questions about teaching, learning, and evaluation.

Educational evaluation is becoming more important every day. Resources are scarce, budgets are tight, and quality is the bottom line. People need to know if they are getting good value for their educational dollar. Accountability is the rallying cry of today's organizations, and continuous measurement of individuals, teams, businesses, and institutions is considered to be the vehicle. In simple terms, accountability means measuring how well people or programs keep their promises. Yet a recent survey found that, of all the training conducted by private and public organizations, less than 25% used any form of evaluation of the learning besides learner satisfaction surveys (commonly called "smile sheets").

The Importance of Authentic Evaluation

Accountability asks three questions: Who is responsible? What are they responsible for? To whom are they responsible? To evaluate for accountability you need to know what the objectives or goals of the person or program are. You must also determine what you will use as evidence of learner improvement. The more accurate and defensible your criteria, the more confident you can be that your evaluation is authentic. In other words, you usually can't find what you don't know you are looking for.

Our perceptions of people and events shape the reality we then end up struggling with so much.... Every time we go to measure something, we interfere.

– Margaret Wheatley

Note that when we use the term measurement, we use it broadly. Some teachers believe that what gets measured is what gets learned. But measurement can restrict learning. For example, if we equate measurement only with the use of the numbers on a metre stick, we limit measurement to spatial arrangements and physical things. But, because learning involves more than just the physical, using only numbers is limiting.

Many teachers or program developers believe that measurement should be physical or scientific. But counting doesn't tell the whole story. For example, if you are trying to teach a second language to adult learners, you might be inclined to base the evaluation of your teaching on a count of new vocabulary words your students know at the end of the week. To measure these words, you can give your adult students a test on Monday (a pre-test) before teaching the vocabulary and another test on Friday after five days of teaching (a post-test). You would probably find that your students know more words on Friday than they did at the beginning of the week. And you would be pleased with yourself as a teacher, your students, and your curriculum program.

Evaluating Your Philosophy

The Foundation for Planning Evaluation

How you think about adult learners—your philosophy of learning and teaching—has a major impact on the evaluations you create. This chapter asks you to look at your own history and experiences and to consider how what you already know affects what you will, and should, do.

Effective evaluation is intricately woven into the teaching-learning process. When evaluation is incongruent with the philosophy of teaching, learners are more likely to be confused or angry than helped by it. To bring your evaluation and teaching practices into line with your ideas, you need to reassess your philosophy of teaching and ask yourself if your methods and criteria for evaluation match your beliefs about what and how adults should learn.

There are many examples of incongruent evaluation and teaching methods. No doubt you have stories you could add to this chapter. Below are four examples that illustrate how ideas and actions can contradict each other. As you read each case, ask yourself how the instructor could have avoided the disgruntlement of students. What evaluation procedures would you have designed that would be more closely aligned with the teaching-learning philosophy and methods?

Story 1: Apparent teaching-learning philosophy: self-directed learning. *Evaluation: graded presentations*

A college instructor teaching a graduate course entitled “Adult Learning and Development” had informed students that the class was to be democratic, based on students’ self-directed learning. The culminating project was a self-directed research study, and learners were invited to share their results with the whole class. But the presentation itself was graded by the instructor, using

criteria the instructor had developed and failed to share with students until the final grades were in their hands. Even though the grades were relatively high, many students felt betrayed, and the instructor’s evaluative comments were largely distrusted or ignored altogether. Two students lodged complaints with the department chair.

Story 2: Apparent teaching-learning philosophy: exploratory process-oriented dialogue. *Evaluation: graded essay examinations*

A seminar course called “Issues in North American Adult Education” was taught using collaborative dialogue among students. The instructor presented herself as a nurturing, guiding facilitator of learning, rather than an authority. Students were encouraged to question the instructor’s statements, and to explore and appreciate multiple perspectives on various issues. To calculate final grades, students were given a single essay-type examination. The grade for the whole course was based on the instructor’s unilateral judgments of the written exams. Many learners concluded that the notion of process-based exploratory learning was a fraud.

Story 3: Apparent teaching-learning philosophy: collaborative learning. *Evaluation: individual achievement*

In a course entitled “Leadership and Change” collaborative learning was touted as the philosophy of choice in adult learning situations. Learn-

Planning for Evaluation

What Do You Want Learners to Know?

Before you begin planning, there are three questions you should ask yourself. Why should evaluation take place? What should be evaluated? How should the evaluation be done? If you can answer them, you will know what to look for and how to make sense of what you see when you are evaluating the learner's progress.

Valid, reliable, and authentic evaluation does not just happen. It must be carefully planned. A hastily thrown-together test or a quick look at learners will probably yield some sort of information, but it may not reveal what you really want to know—the progress your learners have made or how effective your program or teaching has been.

Evaluation is not a single step; it is a process that involves many activities. They don't necessarily unfold in a particular sequence, and some take more time than others. Some happen simultaneously, and some may be so intuitive that you're not aware you're doing them. But whenever you conduct an evaluation, you will need to consider the following in your planning:

- Why should the evaluation take place?
- What should be evaluated?
- What do you want learners to know?
- What does the institution want to know?
- What do you want to know?
- What approaches should be used?
- What about validity and reliability?
- How much time and other resources do you have?

Why Should the Evaluation Take Place?

To answer this question, first ask another question. What are *your* real reasons for evaluating? Be honest with yourself.

There are many reasons for evaluating. Getting scores for your final grades—if you have such things as final grades—is only one of them. For example, you might want a quick indicator to decide what further help a learner needs. Or you might want learners to know how they have progressed since the beginning of the learning experience, or to celebrate their own growth. Perhaps you want to find out if learners are ready to move to more advanced levels, or assume responsibility for doing certain tasks. You may have to report how well the learner is doing to your supervisor or institution. Finally, you might want to know how well particular teaching methods are working. All these reasons are valid.

Summative or formative evaluation

Summative evaluation occurs at the end of a unit or course of study. Its purpose is to summarize what the learner has accomplished and the growth that has taken place. Usually the results of summative evaluation are shared beyond the learning situation, reported to the institution or corporation sponsoring the learning, and used by this agent to determine what happens next.

Developing Criteria for Evaluation

Choosing a Frame of Reference

Evaluation involves making judgments. Making judgments involves making comparisons, and this is where criteria come into play. The purpose of this chapter is to look at the criteria you will use as you develop your own approach to evaluation.

Let's take a personal example to illustrate the main theme of this chapter. Tara is an accomplished classical pianist; Jim collects hockey cards, using the activity as a way to relax at the end of a hectic day. While these activities seem quite disparate, they have one thing in common: each is governed by specific rules. Tara reads the music she plays; in her head she hears an interpretation based on years of listening to performances, studying scores, and music criticism. This is the standard she uses to judge her playing. If Jim buys or trades a special hockey card, he checks the wear of its edges to judge its shape and evaluates if it is a good buy or not. This activity also has certain rules or standards.

In evaluating learning, the criteria (rules or standards) should be stated as explicitly as possible, and they should be congruent with the intents of the learner and the purposes of the program or instructor. The criteria should also be applied equally to every learner in the group over the period of learning. Even in programs using emergent criteria (such as personal-growth courses where neither outcomes nor criteria should be pre-determined), facilitators and learners need to work hard to name the criteria as they evolve.

In selecting criteria, there are other important considerations. Priorities among criteria must be established clearly: it is easy to generate too

many criteria or criteria that are difficult to apply thoughtfully when marking an assignment or observing a single learner performance. Some criteria are idealistic but impractical: they can't be realistically used to compare learner performances. Politics are involved: criteria often must be negotiated with stakeholders besides the learners. Finally, criteria must be fitted into the big picture: time, environment, learners, and history will shape and are shaped by the criteria.

Criterion, Normative, and Self-Referenced Evaluation

You can use three different frames of reference to make judgments about the learner's progress: criterion, normative, and self-reference. Each represents a very different perspective of what learning counts most, and each sets up a different authority on which judge the learner's progress.

Criterion-referenced evaluation compares a learner's performance to an absolute, external standard or criterion. Teachers or institutions use criterion-referenced evaluations when they believe a source external to the learner (such as standards compiled through consensus among subject-matter experts, or job competencies stipulated by a professional association) has the authority and expertise to state what the learner

Choosing A Strategy

Alternative Methods of Evaluation

This chapter outlines a number of alternative types of evaluation. Most of these are more fully developed in the Toolbox section. Here we will introduce multiple methods and present some considerations for choosing among the methods.

When learners and teachers hear the term evaluation, they often think only of tests. Too bad. There are many other ways to discover information about learners' progress and inform them of it. These include checklists and anecdotal records, learner-teacher conferences, portfolios, journals, and class presentations.

We encourage instructors to evaluate learning at a variety of levels. It is important to both assess how well learners know and understand content and how well learners can apply, analyze, and evaluate concepts and create new ideas. Tests that use multiple-choice, true and false, matching, and fill-in-the-blank questions can sometimes effectively assess learner knowledge and comprehension. However, traditional paper-and-pencil tests are limited.

Multiple Methods

The best way to meet the diversity of learner needs and preferences and to develop a rich, holistic understanding of what is really happening for learners is to use a variety of methods to collect information for your evaluative judgments. Each method is limited in perspective and has practical drawbacks. But each captures a particular dimension of the learning process that may otherwise be invisible. To help all learners experience success and enable them to show their strengths as well as their weaknesses, employ multiple methods. Use diagnostic processes as

well as summative ones, encourage learners to formulate their own questions as well as answer the instructor's questions, and provide a variety of open-ended opportunities for them to show their critical and creative abilities as well as their abilities to memorize and apply concepts.

Good evaluation is a cooperative and ongoing endeavour that actively involves both learners and teachers. Evaluation procedures can be meaningful to both learners and teachers and an extension of learning for both. Evaluation methods can encourage learners to synthesize knowledge, rather than seeing it in isolated segments.

Choosing Assessment Methods

An evaluation method simply provides a source of data to help you answer the questions about learners that matter most, within a particular context. When choosing a method, first examine the data source.

- What sources yield the best data to answer the most important evaluation questions?
- Do I have the time/resources/technical skills to *obtain* this data? To *process* this data?
- Is the data source reliable?
- Can the data be collected ethically?
- Will other users of the evaluation be confident in the data sources chosen?

Evaluating Technical Skills

“Factual” and “Procedural” Knowledge

Before we can think about how to evaluate a technical skill, we need to understand more clearly just what is involved in the process of learning that skill. This chapter considers various aspects of evaluating the technical skills of students and, just as important, how to create the right learning framework so they can develop these skills in the first place.

The term *technical* comes from the word *technology*. Technical skills most often include the ability to use technology, usually the ability to perform specific procedures that involve action. Technical skills usually also involve decision making. In simple language, when performing a technical skill, making one choice could be considered correct; another choice could be considered incorrect.

An example of a technical skill is knowing how to operate a tool or machine that performs a necessary task in the workplace. Or a technical skill could involve knowing how to use a computerized machine. It could include a complex set of sub-skills, such as using the different functions of an elaborate word-processing package. Technical skills might be inter-connected with knowledge, attitude, and intuition, such as the skill of executing a difficult passage on a musical instrument.

Two Kinds of Knowledge in Technical Skills

To help evaluate technical skills, most educators separate knowledge into two forms. These are simply called “factual” knowledge and “procedural” knowledge. *Factual knowledge* is usually what we consider “content.” For example, oper-

ating an electric meat slicer might involve the factual knowledge of naming the parts of the machine, stating the pertinent safety precautions, or listing the procedures. *Procedural knowledge* is the knowledge of how to perform certain actions. Procedural knowledge for operating the meat slicer might be knowledge that allows the learner to operate the machine independently, safely, and correctly.

The great end of life is not knowledge but action.

— Thomas Huxley

If you’re like most teachers who are teaching technical skills, you probably already believe that procedural knowledge is the main emphasis of your instruction. Factual knowledge may be nice to have, but it is not crucial. In fact, some people who are quite expert at doing things—performing technical skills—can’t name the parts or describe what they are doing. You probably also know that procedural knowledge is developed through action—usually repeated action, practice, and experience. Procedural knowledge gradually becomes internalized until it is so much a part of us that we are not aware of it. Most people learn new skills by practising them until they are comfortable repeating them.

Evaluating Performance

Standard-Setting, Observation, and Interpretation

Performance objectives are controversial. Educators fight over their value and the extent to which they should be used. Some believe that outlining, following, and evaluating performance objectives is the only way that learning can be seen. Others counter that performance objectives evaluate only a very narrow aspect of education. However, if you are dealing in performance skills, your objectives should be clear, understandable, and easy to measure.

Jim's introduction to performance objectives was as a young, frightened, novice teacher. Early in the morning on the first day of school, the administrators led the teachers into the concrete auditorium, darkened the lights, and flashed up a short movie.

The movie was about behavioural objectives, and starred a little cartoon fish. The hero, or victim as he turned out to be, was looking to travel somewhere; but, sadly, he had not outlined a specific plan. As he swam around in circles, he frantically inquired of all the denizens of the deep, "Do you know where I'm going?" None knew. Finally, he met a shark and asked the same question, "Do you know where I'm going?" "Right this way," the shark invited, and pointed to his gaping mouth with his large fin. The little fish swam inside and was devoured.

The point of the story, for new teachers, was obvious. If they didn't write good behavioural objectives, they would surely die! At least, as the administration of the school pointed out, they would not know where they were going and would ruin the lives of all the students who had put their trust in them. (Better a shark should devour you.) Even for fresh, young teachers, the juxtaposition of a cartoon fish with apocalyptic warnings of imminent disaster was a bit laughable; however, there was a point.

Defining Objectives for Competency

Unlike inter-personal or problem-solving capabilities, technical skills are usually determined ahead of time. They should be taught according to objectives that are described in precise, specific detail. Ask the following four questions.

Who?

Are the learners complete beginners with no experience using this particular skill? What abilities and background do they have that may be helpful in learning this new skill? What characteristics do they have that may affect the way they perform the skill?

Will do what?

This is the content of the task you want them to be able to perform at the time of evaluation.

Under what circumstances?

This is the situation in which learners must perform the task. Who will they work with? What tools will they use? What time pressures and other task pressures create the context in which they must perform the skill?

Evaluating Growth in Conceptual Knowledge

How Do People Come To Understand Something?

We know that learning is not a process of simple consumption. However, many evaluation measures still work from this assumption. To design more effective measures to evaluate knowledge, we must understand how people develop concepts and thinking skills.

When evaluating conceptual knowledge, we must be very careful not to make the mistake of assuming that each person uses the same images and words to make sense of the concepts taught in a course. Learners differ. And teachers have processed conceptual knowledge in a particular way, using their own experiences, words, and ideas. The tests they set reflect their own subjective ways of understanding the concepts, whether global, analytic, abstract, concrete, intuitive, logical, connected to internal experiences or external events.

So-called objective tests, like multiple-choice and true-false item tests that purport to test a learner's knowledge of the facts, certain items of information that the test-designer considers most important, and these concepts are represented in the test-designer's language. Learners are often frustrated by tests because this language does not match the unique way in which they've constructed a particular concept. They may know and understand the information being tested quite well, but the way the evaluation tool is formulated can confuse them enough to make them score poorly.

How do people come to know something? And how can we tell when they know it? Knowledge is a slippery concept that has been debated at length by philosophers and advertisers, engineers and theologians alike.

New Knowledge Is Actively Constructed, Not Passively Absorbed

The old "jug and mug" image of learning is rejected by most teachers, who realize that conceptual knowledge can't be poured into empty heads. People *actively* make meanings of their own from all experiences, including formal education. And all people construct knowledge differently. For instance, if you read a list of simple words to a group of adults—words such as car, fruit, holiday, winter—each person in the group will form a different mental image because each has a unique association with the same word. When presented with a new idea, we do the same thing. We compare it to the understandings and ideas we already have. We interpret the new idea by connecting it to personal experiences that illustrate it.

Everyone Creates a Personal Knowledge

Every new concept changes the way we think and act. Imagine your memory as a series of linked data bases, like a personal Internet, into which you are trying to file a new bit of information. When we are constructing new ideas, we search our data base to find corresponding infor-

Evaluating “Levels” of Conceptual Growth

Using Bloom’s Taxonomy

Benjamin Bloom’s taxonomy of how learners understand concepts is still widely used to develop learning objectives and evaluation tools and to create learning activities and questions for students that reach the “higher-order” thinking skills. Despite its limitations, Bloom’s taxonomy can be useful in a variety of ways.

In 1959, Benjamin Bloom created his now-famous list to describe how learners develop their understanding of a concept. In creating this list, or taxonomy, as it was called, Bloom was responding to a problem that troubled many educators.

At the time, learning was usually equated with rote memorization. To counter this belief, Bloom created a hierarchy of thinking skills. He hoped to remind teachers that a learner’s ability to copy and regurgitate an explanation of a new concept did not equal knowledge of that concept. In fact, he noted that such simple-minded explanations were a long way from an ability to apply the concept to solve problems or create new ideas from it. Bloom especially wanted to draw attention to what he called “higher-order cognitive skills,” and to avoid over-emphasis on memorization.

Although it is now common to be critical of his taxonomy, Bloom created a tool that can be used in a variety of ways—though its use should be confined to specific purposes, with careful provision for its shortcomings.

*Life is short, art long, opportunity fleeting,
experience treacherous, judgment difficult.*
– Hippocrates

Bloom’s Taxonomy

Bloom’s taxonomy categorizes conceptual development. According to Bloom, there is a logical order to cognitive ability. The “higher levels” (noted by higher numbers) are understood by Bloom to include each of the “lower levels.” For example, a person who engages in the cognitive process of synthesis must also engage in the cognitive processes of comprehension and analysis.

Briefly explained and listed below are the categories of Bloom’s taxonomy. Bloom’s work has limitations, but we have found that it helps students become more thoughtful about evaluation.

Using Bloom’s Taxonomy

Bloom’s taxonomy can help us vary the kinds of questions we ask learners, the types of tasks we use to evaluate their growth, and the sorts of assignments and activities they construct to demonstrate their conceptual growth. Use the verbs and sample questions listed below to create your own questions and tasks for learners, and also questions to ask yourself when you observe learner performances.

Evaluating “Relational” Skills

Caring about People

Have you ever known a person who just seems to enjoy people and whom people enjoy being around? These special people bring a vitality to whatever they do. What makes them so special? What skills do they have that others, who are just as intelligent and organized, seem to lack? And, more to the point of this chapter, can these skills be taught?

Relational skills are those interpersonal behaviours that help people build productive relationships with others. Relational skills may have a concrete and observable dimension, but what really drives the important skills of relationship-building are a number of intangible attitudes. They include caring about people, seeing yourself more as a servant than a ruler, and having the ability to see another’s point of view. Some writers call these relational skills “soft skills,” but the term seems peculiarly vague and inappropriate for such complex learning. “Soft” and “relationship” don’t seem to fit well together, probably because relationships are harder to build than many people believe.

How To Talk about Relational Skills

Writing about relational skills can be difficult because the intertwining of skills, emotions, and attitudes is complex. Relational skills include a willingness to listen, understand other perspectives, and reach out with empathy and compassion to build connections. They include communication skills: the ability to express ideas clearly, simply, and honestly, and to vary expression to meet the listener’s needs. They also include personal skills: self-awareness, self-respect, patience, emotional balance, and ability to trust. In the workplace, relational skills

include interpersonal skills like mediating a dialogue, handling complaints, giving constructive feedback, interviewing skills, coaching employees, delivering engaging presentations, and being able to work with a variety of people.

One problem in discussing relational skills is that none of them can be developed in a single period of instruction, whether it’s a one-day workshop or a 12-week seminar. These skills are complex. Our best guess is that they are learned behaviours, developed over a lifetime of observing good models and practicing them in all the significant relationships of your life: seeing your grandfather shake hands with every member of the church every Sunday; being with a teacher who really cheered you on; having a close friend who listened to your problems over coffee; working through the thousands of conversations of a marriage; watching a gifted manager inspire and involve people in a community effort surpassing everyone’s expectations.

Relational skills are more than just behaviours; they are entwined with values and culture, and underpinned by the particular ways we have come to think about other people. They are enmeshed with our sense of self, and they may border on spiritual dimensions. It takes time, experience, and many positive role models for most people to develop healthy personal and interpersonal ways of behaving. Changing one’s

Towards Dynamic Assessment

Capturing Learning in the Moment

One educator calls conventional measurement “dip-sticking.” Instructors think they can shove a dip-stick into their students’ brain engines and check the level of learning, presumably to decide whether or not the student needs topping-up. To extend the metaphor, what does learning and teaching mean if you understand learning as “topping-up?” How can we capture human understanding using a static instrument?

Imagine photographing an apple blossom on a late April morning and trying to draw generalizations about the growth achieved by the tree. You probably have noticed yourself that the blossom appears and unfurls within a few days, a burst of life-energy that the casual passerby would easily miss. By the time we can see the apple tree’s spring growth, many changes have already taken place deep inside. If it is impossible to capture in one static moment the various complex dynamics of growth going on in a plant at any given moment, how can we capture human learning using a static instrument?

The Problem with Conventional Assessment

To summarize points made in previous chapters, conventional assessment methods tend to be passive because the evaluator is in the position of “reading” the performance of the learner, who is viewed as a static object. Too often the evaluation and evaluator are assumed to be neutral, as though one human being can truly be objective in the process of perceiving, interpreting these perceptions, and making value judgments about another human being. The impact of the evaluation

procedure itself on the learner’s motivation and understanding is often not considered in conventional methods of mechanical measurement. Learners are not involved actively or even asked to assess themselves.

Conventional test construction often fails to consider socio-cultural milieu, socio-economic status, and linguistic and ability differences, which excludes some learners. Although these practices have shown themselves to be inaccurate and inconsistent, they continue to be used in prediction, decision-making, and inferences about everything from the leadership potential of employees to learner prospects for lifelong success.

Dynamic Assessment—An Empowering Alternative

Today’s organizations are encouraging continuous learning in order to cope with rapid change. Conventional assessment approaches using pre-determined standards to measure performance outcomes are incompatible with the continuous learning philosophy, which emphasizes risk taking, innovation, systems thinking and reflective dialogue. Dynamic implies something alive and

Helping Learners Evaluate Themselves

A Critical Goal of Learning

Adult learners have been well socialized by our North American system of schooling. They expect their learning assessments to come from an external authority, such as a supervisor or instructor. This chapter outlines how to determine whether self-assessment is appropriate and how to help students develop skills in this area.

Self-assessment refers to “the involvement of students in identifying standards and/or criteria to apply to their work, and making judgments about the extent to which they have met these criteria and standards.”

The purpose of this chapter is to outline ways of determining the appropriateness of self-assessment for your particular context, ways of introducing self-assessment, and ways of helping learners develop skill in self-assessment. But first we want to point out that self-assessment is not appropriate for all situations, all learners, or all instructional contexts: sometimes self-assessment is better not done.

The methods of getting learners involved in self-assessment that are covered in this chapter include reflective writing, such as journals and learning logs (containing summaries of learning, narration and analyses of critical incidents, daily notes about ongoing progress), reflective dialogue with others, portfolios of work samples, and interviews between learner and instructor or supervisor.

An intellectual is someone whose mind watches itself.

—Albert Camus

Why Self-Evaluation Is a Critical Goal

Many learners are uncomfortable when asked to assess their own learning. They don't know how to begin. They don't know how to set assessment criteria or choose which aspects of their own performance and understandings to assess. Instructors of adults should therefore be prepared to help them develop the skills and tools they need for self-assessment, and to work with them until they develop a comfortable level of expertise.

Some adults need help moving past initial resistance; they believe that teachers who encourage students towards self-assessing abdicate the instructor's responsibility to evaluate learners. Sometimes adults are wary of sharing their most honest self-assessments with supervisors or instructors who, they may believe with some justification, may use self-assessment information “against them.”

Does self-assessment sound like too much work? If so, consider why the investment of time and energy in self-assessment is not only worthwhile, but critical in a world of fast-paced change.

- Self-assessment increases people's openness to learning. People in the habit of assessing their own learning are more

Integrating Ongoing Evaluation into the Learning Process

Continuous Assessment of Self, Peers, and Instruction

Too often, teachers and learners equate evaluation with something done at the end of a program of study, as useful to get a grade. However, to be effective, evaluation must be ongoing, continuous, and completely integrated into the learning process. It can come from a peer, an instructor, the consequences of the task itself, or oneself—through comparing one’s performance with a model or set of standards or through sudden insight.

Instruction that is truly learner-centered and committed to helping people grow and improve relies on formative evaluation during instruction, not just summative assessment at the end of instruction. Formative evaluation provides feedback at the moment of practice, creating an opportunity to use the feedback to make corrections. It alerts learners to the experience and to what they are learning. Most important, it transfers the responsibility for monitoring learning from the educator or the educational institution onto the learners.

Many short workshops or courses that do not award grades or formally test learners can incorporate meaningful opportunities for evaluation during instruction. Even a half-day session can build in evaluative methods that are efficient, economical, and more useful than the “smile sheets” that tend to show only whether participants were entertained.

One of the most comprehensive examples we’ve seen of a workshop program that integrated multiple evaluation methods into every part of the learning process is described in this chapter (“Ongoing Evaluation of Coaching Skills”). But you can choose from a variety of activities that are not time-consuming or difficult to implement, listed throughout this chapter.

Focusing the Learners on Assessment

We encourage you to spend some moments discussing your methods of assessment and your rationale for emphasizing it throughout the course. Here are some statements about evaluation that you may want to discuss with participants.

- All new learning comes from evaluating past experience: remembering it, analyzing it, making sense of it, speculating about its whys and its possibilities.
- Self-awareness is the goal of most learning, and self-awareness develops only through self-evaluation.
- Without the perspective and feedback of others, we are locked into our own self-reinforcing loops of behaving and thinking.
- What gets evaluated is what gets learned.

Begin a workshop by involving participants in an evaluation activity. This reminds them to monitor their experiences throughout the workshop, and become more aware of what is happening moment to moment.

Evaluating for Grades

What's in a Number?

We hope this chapter will help you to use grades more efficiently, more creatively, and more ethically. However, before discussing how to use grades constructively, we believe it is important to look at them critically. The more you know about grading, both good and bad, the more you will be able to use grades properly.

Gradings by numbers is based on the premise that a number is a useful and reliable tool for differentiating human achievement and progress. A number grade is a normative assessment that uses criteria applied universally, is based on the laws of averages, assumes that human learning within a limited time period can be validly and reliably assessed by a third party and that assessment can be represented by a numeral.

But these assumptions about grading are questionable. Agriculturists evaluating soil examine 16 different dimensions of soil, each of which can be rated using 50 different criteria. The dimensions of soil are so wide ranging and the variables affecting assessment so complex that any single number obscures important characteristics that truly differentiate soils. Further, soil specialists claim that subsuming all these assessments under a single numeric “grade” would be inaccurate, even absurd. If soils differ so radically, how dare we assign a numeric grade to the living magic and complexity of individual human growth and learning?

The Meaning of a Grade

A number grade is an arbitrary symbol. Although it seems concrete, a grade is imbued with many taken-for-granted cultural meanings. This can be good. For example, asking adult learners

what grades mean to them can lead to fruitful discussions about how we attach self-worth to a number, about personal expectations often derived from parental emphasis on report cards and high grades, about the limitations of a number grade, and about feelings of dependency and defensiveness.

Many students believe that a grade is like a reward; they talk in terms of the grade *they deserve*. Many students and instructors believe that a grade represents competence and hard work. Because their life experience has taught them that they are generally competent and hard-working, most adult learners naturally believe they deserve high grades. The problem for instructors is that a grade becomes a commodity in an exchange relationship—proper payment due for effort or for adherence to all course demands. Not only is hard work difficult to assess and quantify, but the nature of its relation to learning is debatable.

Our students often tell us, “I want to see *where I stand* in relation to everybody else.” We appreciate their honesty, but why do they want to know? What use is such knowledge to their own growth? Perhaps their many years in a competitive school system has taught learners that people should be ranked from poor to weak, from good to excellent. Maybe we have all learned that comparing our own performance, knowledge, effort, and creativity to others is the best way to gauge our

Evaluating Your Practice

Scrutinizing the Scrutinizer

This chapter begins with a pointed question. We encourage you to be honest. Do you regularly set aside time to deliberately and systematically evaluate your own practice? If you are like most teachers, you might have to answer, “No.” Read on.

Although most of us think about what we do by replaying past incidents and imagining future scenarios, the pressures of adult education often divert us from the investment of time that produces truly reflective teaching. Perhaps we think it’s easier to justify using what little free time we have planning new sessions than reflecting on what’s past and done.

The irony is that we ask learners to do precisely what we so often fail to do—assess ourselves. If you subscribe to the underlying theme of this book, that our efforts when evaluating learners should be primarily directed at helping them become more self-sufficient, discerning, and committed to evaluating their own performance, then you need to become committed to evaluating your own practice.

In Chapter 2, you spent time exploring your philosophy of teaching and learning as a starting point for planning evaluation approaches best suited for your context as an educator. Now we encourage you to complete the cycle. What new insights await you about growth in your thinking and practice?

This chapter presents suggestions to help you engage in personal, critical reflection of your instructional practice, including evaluation methods. We have borrowed especially from ideas presented by Stephen Brookfield because instructors tell us they are provocative and valuable. You will probably find many of these exercises useful for the learners you work with, and as you make a habit of self-assessment in your own

growth, you will uncover more ideas to share with other trying to grow through self-evaluation.

Expanding Self-Evaluation and Growth

When you evaluate yourself, first clarify the purpose of the evaluation. Is it to provide statistics for an institution? To punish or encourage yourself? Or to move towards further growth?

Joe Heimlich and Emmalou Norland (1994) have written a practical, thoughtful guide for instructors interested in self-evaluation: *Developing Teaching Style in Adult Education*. They argue that educators experience two kinds of growth. First, they grow towards congruence; they examine what they’ve said and done and attempt to align their behaviour with what they believe and value. Second, educators expand; when they achieve competence and internal consistency between actions and beliefs, they expand their style and repertoire. They try new things, which might include rethinking their rationale for doing particular skills. They try different things, which might mean attempting new techniques in familiar situations. They try challenging themselves, which might mean questioning basic approaches. Expansion does not mean the continuous striving to reach an impossible ideal, but growing by spiraling upwards, outwards, or inwards.



TOOLBOXES

Assessing Portfolios

What Is a Portfolio?

A portfolio is a folder assembled by the learner that contains samples of the learner's work collected over a short period of time, such as a particular course of instruction, or a longer period, such as a two-year post-secondary program. The kinds of items will reflect the nature of the course content. An art portfolio may contain sketches, photographs, and paintings in various stages of completion. A portfolio for a management development program may contain written case studies describing aspects of the learner's workplace situation, a leadership style inventory, personal written reflections completed at various points, a plan for implementing a new program, an analysis of a particular management problem, a videotape showing a presentation or a chairing of a meeting. Any of the following items are commonly collected in learner portfolios.

- formal written papers, articles, descriptions, case studies, problem solutions
- assessment inventories (such as personality or learning style inventories)
- photographs or drawings of learner-created products, artwork
- videotapes of learner presentations
- journal, memos, or personal responses
- written reports/attestations to learner performance by others (peers and colleagues, or supervisors)
- test papers and results
- written observations of performance contributed by the instructor

Examples of Portfolio

Assessment in Actual Practice

Lendley Black (1993) offers the following examples:

- Emporia State University (ESU) uses portfolios extensively to assess students' basic skills, knowledge, and values that are difficult to evaluate—integration, critical thinking, analysis of issues, values clarification, multicultural issues, and so on. A limited number of items was chosen to avoid assessing voluminous folders, and because staff feel that much information can be learned from relatively few items. Students submit nine products. Regularly scheduled reviews of the portfolios between instructor and student take place at key points in the student's academic career. The process of developing a portfolio required staff discussion of program goals and development of a statement of what students were to learn. A meeting of general education faculty and interested students was held to communicate this information. Course instructors then explained to students the intentions of the course, how it fit into the general education program, and how it helped achieve the broad goals of the program. Curriculum modifications have been made as a result of portfolios. The staff is now developing scoring protocols with descriptors, and exploring the use of electronic portfolios.
- At Western College (Miami University) staff first summarized portfolios by types—papers, lab reports, projects, in-class writing, exams, quizzes, and computer

Assessing Learner Journals

What Is a Learning Journal?

Journals are a learning tool. Journal writing is a powerful way for learners to clarify their own experiences and connect them to new concepts. Through the act of writing, learners often discover things they didn't know they knew. Connections often unfold almost magically in the writing process, as learners experience those wonderful "Ah-ha!" moments through the free writing a journal invites.

Journal writing is first-draft. It gives learners an opportunity to explore their personal feelings, hunches, half-formed thoughts, questions, and flickering associations without fear of how it sounds or worry about spelling and sentence structure. Learners should be encouraged to write in paragraphs rather than point form (paragraphs allow the flow of thought to be released), but these paragraphs might be sloppy compared to the standards of formal writing. Learners should not have to revise or rewrite journals. The point is to give them a place to work through their experiences in their own words.

Be clear about the journal's purpose. Some journals are meant to help learners give voice to their own responses, exploring their feelings and personal experiences or connecting these with the course materials. Other journals are meant to help learners develop as critical thinkers, beginning with personal experience but gradually moving outwards to explore different perspectives and to assess assumptions and beliefs. Some journals are meant to accomplish both purposes. Communicate the journal's purpose clearly to learners. Assessment of the journal is based on its purpose.

Examples of Journals in Actual Practice

Content will depend on the type of learning experience and the purpose of the journal. Below are some examples.

- In a political science course, learners are asked to write personal and critical responses to each of the readings in the program. They are encouraged to decide their own starting point for response, perhaps choosing from a list of suggestions such as those on page 156.
- Participants developing their conflict management skills in a series of seminars keep a daily journal recording what they did and said in key interpersonal interactions, and what they thought and felt but didn't say. They also write their interpretations of their own behaviours—what it reveals about the beliefs guiding their actions—and they record how well they're doing in using some of the conflict management skills they learn in the group seminars. Periodically participants are encouraged to re-view their journal and write about their overall progress.
- Managers participating in a company's new "action-reflection" program keep a personal journal of the process. The program teams each manager with others from different departments in the firm. Their mandate is to devise and experiment with solutions to a particular problem the firm is experiencing. The managers each record in their own journals any observable events related to the progress of the implementations, as well as

Assessing Written Assignments

What Are Writing Assignments?

Written products are among the most common assignments that adult learners are asked to prepare and submit for assessment. Written products vary widely according to format, style, purpose, intended audience, and organizing principle. Here are some sample formats.

- Essays or articles: compare and contrast, autobiography or biography, opinion paper, editorial, character profile, personal memoir narrative and analysis, definition, critical review, argument of attack or defense, exploring an issue, theme, or phenomenon, speech, travelogue, and so on.
- Report writing: explaining procedure, describing events or people, technical reports, case study and analysis, problem analysis and proposal, research or lab summary, interview, resume, worksheet, definitions, itinerary, memo, letter, schedule, manual, and so on.
- Imaginative writing: poetry, written drama or scene, song, fictional character description, monologue, short story, imaginative memoir, imaginative dialogue, novel or novel chapter, and so on.
- Alternate or blended writing genres: prose poetry, fictionalized accounts based on a true story, instructional computer programs created through authorware, hypertext programs, photo-essays, scripts for video production or docu-dramas, storyboards, a series of correspondences between two learners, a series of e-mail correspondence or an Internet homepage.

- Process writing: journal, diary, logbook, personal memo, list, quotation collage, note files, and so on.

How Do I Use Writing Assignments?

- **Show people the how-to's of tackling a written assignment.** The issue of helping people through the process of preparing written assignments extends beyond the parameters of this book. However, many adult learners flounder because an instructor assigned written work without offering any suggestions on how to get started, or any recognition of different stages in the process. We have counseled adults who are on the verge of quitting a course because they are intimidated by the requirements for writing sophisticated essays or reports. Many of them completed high school before emphasis on writing instruction and writing process was introduced into the curriculum. Some well-educated folks have never been shown how to brainstorm ideas, how to focus and organize their thinking, how to find the flow, how to rework and revise, then finally edit and polish. Many adults believe that elegant, polished, error-free writing flows magically from the pen. No wonder so many sit staring at a blank computer screen or paper!

Too often, instructors simply expect adults to know what to do, and focus all evaluation on assessing the final product of the writing. But the process of the writing is where the bulk of

Assessing with Video

What Is Video Assessment?

Video is one of the most effective ways to help learners see their own level of performance, learn how to evaluate themselves, and attend to those subtle details of performance that are so much easier to show than explain. Seeing oneself on video produces powerful and almost immediate change. A student teacher has been trying to remember to move among the students more when she's explaining something. She sees herself once from the eye of the video camera at the back of the room, standing far away against the blackboard at the front of the room, and her lessons afterward are instantly more interactive. Videotaping is also a powerful reinforcer and encourager, showing students who may feel frustrated with what they believe to be slow progress that they have actually mastered many new skills.

Being videotaped is also one of the most threatening experiences many learners can imagine when they are learning something unfamiliar. Would you want your inexpert, clumsy efforts at trying something new put on record for all to see in embarrassing detail? Evaluation is stressful enough for most adult learners, and a video camera simply raises the tension a notch. As video cameras become more popular, people are getting used to seeing themselves and others recorded in live action, but there are still many who are afraid of being in front of a camera. One participant in a train-the-trainer session flatly refused to allow her oral presentation to be recorded and quit the course when the instructor tried to persuade her otherwise.

How Do I Use Video for Assessment?

Be sensitive when using this powerful medium for evaluation. Some suggestions follow for using video recordings when evaluating students.

Prepare learners

Be sure to warn adult learners that videotaping is a planned part of the course. If the course is a short workshop, indicate in the course write-up that learner performance will be videotaped. Before using the video camera, discuss the reasons for its use and explain the kinds of things learners should look for when examining their own videos.

If possible, don't restrict videotaping to a one-shot session. For some people, the first occasion that they are videotaped is marked with anxiety, and their first viewing of the playback focuses on their glaring mistakes. When videotaping becomes a regular occurrence, people can focus more precisely on specific aspects of their performance, and note improvement over time.

In some settings it may be appropriate or even necessary to allow learners to opt out of videotaping if they do not wish to participate. Some people may suffer low-esteem or phobias about cameras or pictures of themselves. Some may have religious, cultural, or personal reasons why a videotaped record of their actions is not permissible. Be sensitive to other's feelings in this area, despite your own enthusiasm for the benefits of video playback. If you force videotaping on a person who is extremely uncomfortable with it, he or she will derive little benefit from watching it. First, the performance will be influenced by anxiety and thus may not reflect accurately what that person truly can do. Second, people who

Assessing through Performance Observation

What Is Performance Observation?

Whenever you observe a learner performing a skill, and you purposefully compare that performance with a set of desired criteria, whether in your head or on paper, you are using performance observation to make a judgment.

If you ask a learner to perform a task for the purpose of assessing a skill, you need to decide five things.

1. What is the purpose of the assessment (final testing or improving), and who will use the results?
2. What skills or strategies should be emphasized, and what task will best elicit these?
3. How should the performance be arranged? (What conditions are most appropriate, given your constraints in time and resources? How many performance samples will yield valid results?)
4. What features characterize an effective performance? (How do these need to be adapted to accommodate different situations?)
5. How detailed does the record need to be?

Too often the observer assumes the position of an all-knowing authority who parachutes in to watch people perform, then makes a judgment based on what he or she believes should be done. But the observer may not recognize some considerations that are very important to the learner and shape the choices the learner makes. As observers, we need to ask what situational factors affect the learner's actions. People take shortcuts under

pressure, they adapt regulations for efficiency, they adjust their actions to please or resist supervisors, they invent ways to make do with equipment malfunctions or inadequate tools. The observer's own presence changes a situation. The criteria or standards we use need to be applied flexibly, considering the particular situation and individual.

Here are three additional questions to ask when you observe and judge another person's performance.

1. How does the learner view this performance?
2. How is the learner's performance (or lack of performance) being shaped by the situation?
3. What standards are being used to make this judgment, and are they completely appropriate for this learner in this particular situation?

The important thing is to work collaboratively with the people you are observing. Before observation find out what's important to them. Afterwards, listen to their perspective on their performance and communicate clearly your own perspective, including the criteria you are using. Together explore areas for further development. It is easier to accept feedback when your own view has been heard.

There are two kinds of performance observation assessments: summative and formative. Performance observation for formative assessment is used informally and frequently in skill-based instruction to provide feedback to learners. Ideally learners have many practice opportunities and are given feedback frequently and immediately after their performance. This is a coaching

Assessing with Rating Scales

What Are Rating Scales?

A rating scale measures learner performance against pre-determined criteria, often using a three-point or five-point scale to show where, on a continuum, the learner behaviour falls. Rating scales recognize that learning is continuously developing, and emphasize the element of change. Rating scales can also be used to record judgments about observable features of intangible qualities such as risk taking, listening, enthusiasm, confidence, resourcefulness, and appreciation of multiple perspectives.

Holistic rating scales focus on general impact and make a judgment about the overall quality of a learner's observable performance or product. *Analytic* rating scales break the performance into individual components and rate each independently.

Analytic scales are more complex to use and take time for the evaluator to internalize. One danger is fragmentation: breaking something into too many discrete parts can sometimes destroy its essence. On the other hand, holistic scales do not provide specific information for the learner as to why a performance received a particular rating.

How Do I Use Rating Scales?

Designing the rating scale

- Be selective. Choose only those behaviours and dimensions that you have come to understand are important.
- As much as possible, choose only observable behaviours, or find valid observable behavioural indicators of other learner qualities.

- Allow sufficient space for comments. Numerals alone do not convey much helpful information to learners struggling to improve.
- Express behaviours and criteria in positive terms: "the presenter makes frequent eye contact with people in different areas of the audience," not "the presenter avoids eye contact with certain parts of the audience."

Using the rating scale

- Establish and internalize criteria for rating each dimension on the scale. If, for example, you are observing the organization in a learner's presentation, decide what each number you assign represents. If you will be using the rating scale several times or for several learners, jot down descriptors for each point on the scale.

Organization:

- 1—No clear focus. Provides no organizational pattern. Provides no supporting evidence or clarification. Does not use transitions.
- 2—Often strays from central focus. Provides discernible opening and closing. Uses inappropriate supporting evidence and fails to clarify main points. Transitions are weak and inappropriate.
- 3—Provides a reasonably clear and consistent focus. Provides a definite opening and closing. Uses adequate support and clarification. Uses mainly mechanical transitions.
- 4—Organizes material with a clear focus. Uses a clear organizational pattern with

Using Participant Course Evaluations

“I hate bad evaluation forms—and everyone gets them!” So said a trainer to one of us in frustration. And probably with good reason. Many human resource departments and consulting firms base personnel decisions about training staff on results they achieve from participant evaluations. We have heard cases of instructors in certain organizations who throw away negative participant evaluation forms for fear of nasty consequences. Even in supportive environments, most instructors find that learner criticism can be hard to cope with.

According to Donald Kirkpatrick, participant course evaluation forms, or what are commonly known as “smile sheets,” are often the only form of evaluation that many learning programs undertake. Learner satisfaction, says Kirkpatrick, is only the first level of evaluation. His “Return-on-Investment” model of evaluation shows evaluators how to go much further to assess the value and outcomes of instruction. But in our rush to develop more comprehensive evaluation methods, we’d better be sure not to overlook the value of participant evaluation of the instruction. Nor should we shortchange the time we spend designing useful ways to invite participant feedback, and the need to interpret this feedback to produce what can be valuable information for revising instruction.

What Are Participant Evaluation Forms?

Almost all courses, credit or non-credit, offered to adults should provide some way for participants

to respond in writing to questions about the program’s effectiveness. Usually a participant evaluation form is brief (5 to 20 questions answered with a rating scale), standardized for all similar courses, and completed at the conclusion of the course. Most colleges and universities have clear policies regulating the procedures. They are often exceedingly formal to protect the anonymity of participants, stipulating that the instructor must not be present while participants complete the evaluation forms, and that an appointed person, not the instructor, must collect, seal, and submit the forms to the teaching department.

Why find out what learners thought of a course of instruction? Because learners can jar us from our comfortable assumptions about how things are going. Learner reports about their experiences, their responses and difficulties and triumphs, are rich sources of information when we are trying to make choices about content, instruction, and activities to help guide their learning.

How Do I Use Participant Evaluation Forms?

Determine the purpose of the forms

The design of participant evaluation forms depends, like all evaluation planning, on the purposes for the feedback. Does the instructor want to build a case for his or her effective teaching? Does the program coordinator want to know whether participants think they’ve learned anything useful? Do the course planners want to know if participants are comfortable and having fun?

Using Learner Contracts

What Is a Learner Contract?

A learner contract is a document designed by the learner in collaboration with the instructor before the assessment process. Usually a contract is between one independent learner and one supervisor, although a small group of people might propose a contract.

A contract can state the main purpose and specific goals of the learning experience; the learning activities; the function and responsibility of the instructor; the responsibility of the learners; the period of time bounding the contract; the grade to be awarded for completing different kinds of assignments and tasks to demonstrate learning. Both learner and instructor sign and date the contract and keep a copy for their records.

A contract can be used with a group of learners. For example, one university undergraduate course, “Educational Foundations” (philosophies of teaching and learning), allows each student in the class to contract for a grade: to obtain an A, the student must agree to read and review 10 of the books on the course reading list, participate in all classes, write an essay, and present a philosophical argument to the class. For a B, a student agrees to read and review 7 books, participate in all classes, and write an essay. For a C, a student agrees to read and review 5 books and participate in all classes, and so on. Many students report that they like the system, for it gives them control over their own assessment and workload.

In a life-skills course, learners are invited in the first few classes to design a contract for their learning that lists the particular skill areas they will focus on, and the resources they will use to develop these. Then individual learners design three assignments, with the instructor’s assis-

tance, to demonstrate skill development. The assignments are described on the contract. The learners may also specify the sorts of criteria they would like used as part of the assessment of their assignments.

A contract can also be used with an individual. For example, a person wishing to pursue independent studies in a formal learning institution may contract with an instructor to study and summarize selected articles and books, attend seminars, view instructional videos, or collect data through a research project. The student usually agrees to complete some kind of product(s) that synthesizes and shares the learning: produce a videotape or article, prepare a report, give a presentation, mount a display, or design or implement a program.

How Do I Use Learner Contracts?

There are three distinct phases to a learning contract that are related to the evaluation: getting started, monitoring the process, and evaluating the products.

Getting started

- **With the learner, clearly establish the purpose of the contract.** The purpose should be consistent with the learner’s personal interests and should benefit the learner in achieving her or his own goals. A clear purpose can help provide focus and direction throughout the learning process and create the foundation for evaluation.
- **Choose outcomes that are authentic, not just easily measured.** The activities of the contract should be enjoyable for the learner,

Using Case Studies for Evaluation

What Is A Case Study?

Case studies are often used to illustrate concepts in real-world applications. Instructors bring case studies to the learners, who then analyze and problem-solve. To evaluate learners, case studies are useful in any of the following ways.

- Learners can work through a case study provided by the instructor, writing out their analysis, recommended action, and reasons for the action. Their analysis can be evaluated, by the instructor or by each other, applying criteria such as those listed below.
- Learners can construct their own case studies, using a problem they have selected from their own work or home experience, or from a situation they have read about in the media. Give very specific guidelines and provide samples for learners to use as models. Have learners bring their case studies to a group meeting.
- Learners analyze each other's case studies in small groups, one by one, using a protocol such as the one described below.
- Students can work in pairs to read and analyze each other's case studies.
- After each person has had the benefit of hearing other learners' perspectives on the case study, all learners prepare a revised version of the case study (if necessary) and a written analysis of his or her own case, using the guidelines below.

How Do I Use Case Studies?

There are three main parts to using case studies for assessment. First, the case study must be written. Then it needs to be interpreted and discussed (most learners need help to become skilled in case-study analysis). Finally, learners' analysis of the case study is usually evaluated to determine their ability to understand problematic situations and make appropriate decisions towards resolving them.

Creating case studies

Below are seven steps for writing good case studies for instructional uses. Choose a situation that ends with a particular dilemma to be resolved, choice to make, or action to take. Describe briefly the context (time, place, external and internal environmental factors that affect the situation) and the background incidents of the situation. Sketch only the facts most pertinent to the situation for the reader. Show the events by telling the story as a narrative. Some case studies tell the story from the perspective of a particular character, such as a supervisor who must make a decision to solve a problem. Name the people involved (using pseudonyms) and use dialogue to illustrate key conversations or meetings. Use description. Avoid using judgmental comments when describing the situation. Let the readers interpret the events. Leave the case open-ended. Some case studies end with the main character considering what to do next.

Some case studies are lengthy and comprehensive; others are one paragraph long. When you ask learners to construct a case study themselves, specify the length and level of detail required.

Consider having learners bring draft case studies to a class session to exchange, get feedback

Assessment in On-Line Courses

What Is an “On-Line Course”?

Distance education “on-line,” using the Internet, is becoming increasingly common as the number of Internet users across North America continues to rise. Many instructors and institutions at the time of writing are just beginning to experiment with on-line course delivery methods, while others have been creating and modifying on-line courses since the early 1990s. As a result, there are a huge variety of on-line courses available now employing different instructional methods. Below are a few representative examples. (There is much more than is shown here—only portions of each course are described to illustrate different methods.)

1. Self-paced learning modules

Dr. Margaret Haughey at the University of Alberta teaches an on-line course in Qualitative Research for 20 graduate students around North America who do not know one another. The course has four modules and runs from September to June, but students may enter at any time during that period. Students choose books to read from a suggested list. Then they proceed through the modules at their own pace, concluding the course whenever they complete all four modules. Each module presents an activity for students to do (such as interviewing someone to explore a question related to their research interests, transcribing and analyzing the interview, then writing about the experience) from which they produce a written paper. The paper is sent via e-mail to the instructor, who provides feedback by typing in responses directly onto the student’s paper. Then the student proceeds to the next module.

2. Weekly on-line discussion

Dr. Susan Hutton at the University of Calgary teaches an on-line course in Leadership for about 18 graduate students. The students studied together as a cohort in an intensive spring session on campus, and now they proceed through their on-line courses together. The Leadership course is discussion-based using “First Class,” an on-line course software package. Each week there are prescribed readings. One group of students in the class is leader, responsible for opening the discussion by “posting” a summary of the readings along with one or two focus questions. Then class members “log on” to the course any time during the week that is convenient, and “post” one 300-word response to the focus questions. At the end of the week the leader group posts a 750-word summary of all the responses, with some conclusions. Informal discussion is carried on in a separate file of the course called a Café. Students open this file at their discretion throughout the week and read and respond via e-mail to the threads of discussion that interest them.

3. Collaborative project-based learning

Dr. Leslie Gardner teaches an on-line course in Program Evaluation at St. Stephen’s Theological College in Edmonton, Alberta. Students proceed through four modules at their own pace, within a small learning group. The entire course helps move the groups in progressive steps towards completing a program evaluation project of their choice. Each module contains readings posted on-line that Leslie has composed, and an activity moving the groups further along in their process of designing and conducting a program evaluation. They collaborate via e-mail. Leslie provides written feedback to students on the module assignment, then each group proceeds when

Peer Assessment

What Is Peer Assessment?

Peer assessment involves the formative or summative assessment of a product, activity, or action by one's peer or peers. Although peer assessment contains inherent problems, including a re-structuring of power relationships and the breaking away from the tradition of assessment by experts, when done well peer assessment has great potential for improving learning. It is also an important way to help people develop critical learning skills, including the skills of evaluating oneself and others regularly, critically, and appreciatively, using defensible criteria, and forming follow-up action plans for further learning.

Peer assessment provides necessary alternative perspectives to balance the instructor's limited view. The potential result is richer feedback to the learner. In the workplace, the valuing of peer assessment is evident in the growing interest in practices such as "360 degree" feedback and employee evaluations of supervisors. In summative evaluation, peer assessment interrupts the top-down power flow set in place when the instructor or supervisor is seen as the sole evaluator. Peer assessment helps create more democratic spaces for work and education.

Peer assessment is valuable when a learner needs to tap experiences broader than the instructor's background; when insight about marking criteria would benefit learners; when critically examining another's product would help teach the peer assessor; when the evaluation of learners' work is needed but the teaching staff is already overcommitted; or, when learners' work within a group needs to be evaluated.

Peer evaluation involves two main activities: observing and communicating.

1. Observing

- learning to recognize one's own role and limitations as an observer
- learning to use criteria to observe, interpret, and assess what one sees

2. Communicating

- learning to express one's judgment in helpful ways to a peer
- learning to receive, interpret, and act on feedback provided by others

Following are common situations of peer assessment in educational evaluation:

Situation 1: Individual: One person provides face-to-face or written feedback for a peer, either anonymously or with full disclosure

Situation 2: Group : Together provide feedback for one individual through discussion

Situation 3: Individual: Evaluates a group he or she has worked with, through written feedback

Situation 4: Group: Evaluate themselves as a group through discussion

Situation 5: Group: Evaluates another group, through discussion or written feedback

People develop valuable skills in observation, interpretation, and communication as they practise assessing their peers (see the section below describing Benefits of Peer Assessment). However, problems can develop when peer assessment is combined with summative judgment. For example, instructors may incorporate a peer-assessed grade with a grade they have given. Sometimes peer rating and instructor rat-

Using Objective Tests to Evaluate

What Are Objective Tests?

Objective tests usually refer to paper-and-pencil tests containing closed questions, where very little deviation is permitted from the “right” answer as determined by the test designer. These typically include multiple-choice questions, short-answer, true-false, matching or labeling activities that students complete under timed conditions with or without access to resources to assist them. Because such tests may focus mostly on recall or limited application of information, many instructors prefer to use more authentic or holistic assessment activities. However, objective-style tests offer some benefits that will be discussed below.

The word “objective” is a bit misleading. Such tests are subjective because they reflect the test designer’s (usually instructor’s) view of the world. The instructor decides what is true and what is false. In making up questions the instructor chooses what knowledge is most important, what questions are most worth asking about that knowledge, how that knowledge will be represented (what terms and language will be used), and what interpretations are most acceptable as answers. Objective tests certainly do not provide the “best” evidence of a learner’s knowledge just because their results are quantitative.

The purpose of this Toolbox is to offer some simple suggestions about when and how to create objective tests. Stated simply, if you are using objective tests, you might as well make good use of them. This includes making them easy to grade and as student-friendly as possible. Note that this Toolbox is not a primer on the theories of test construction—that is well beyond our purpose.

Why Create Tests?

There may be situations in your teaching when it is appropriate to use comprehensive, paper-and-pencil, objective tests. But the use of such tests may seem to contradict the philosophies we have stated in this book. Here are reasons why some instructors find there are times when tests are a useful evaluation method, even for adult learners.

First, tests sometimes are the best way to give teachers a quick idea of how students are doing. Second, as teachers work through the process of creating a test, they make conscious decisions about what content is worth knowing. When this happens, comprehensive tests serve as guides for designing teaching plans. Third, a comprehensive test helps some students focus on what they are doing in class. If students know that a comprehensive test waits for them sometime soon, most will attend to the activities of the classroom in a more rigorous manner. Finally, when students do well on a comprehensive test, they often feel a real sense of success and accomplishment. The key, for us, was working to make sure that those students who studied hard did well. For many adult students, tests represent the “currency” of an educational experience. Doing well on a homework assignment or a short essay is one thing; however, doing well on a comprehensive test is something quite different. Many learners have told us how surprised and pleased they were that they were learning so much—when they successfully completed tests.

Many of our adult students remember experiences where they have failed tests. Naturally, some test fear remains. When this is the case, comprehensive tests can help re-establish a “success cycle” for learners. If learners begin to have a little success—if they do well on an objective

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