Frequently asked questions from the evaluator’s mailbox

I often get questions in workshops and through e-mail about evaluating professional development. Here are five of the most frequently asked questions and my answers.

FAQ 1:
Our school district wants to hire outside experts to evaluate a major initiative involving professional development as a central component. How do we ensure we get competent people who will do the job?

Locating the right outside people to evaluate a program and then getting them to do the kind of evaluation you need can be challenging. Remember, there are lots of measurement experts around the country, fewer experts who specialize in program evaluation, and an even smaller pool of program evaluation experts who know professional development well enough to focus on the right issues.

How you proceed depends on the size of the project budget and your timeline. You can contact an expert group in your area whose work you have already seen or you can write and disseminate a formal request for proposal (RFP). Posting the RFP on your web site is only the beginning of your search. You need to use your informal networks to let experts know your needs. Otherwise, you may find that you get only a very small number of proposals from which to choose.

Require any company submitting a proposal to include a sample program evaluation it has done recently. Require that the proposal include a timeline of “deliverables” so that the study has milestones resulting in periodic written reports you can share with your governing board. Some companies do well designing the evaluation and collecting data but are slow to deliver their reports. Payment for the work can be connected to receiving the reports at specified junctures.

FAQ 2:
Our school district (or school) has no resources for professional development program evaluation. We read about evaluation, and we talk about the need to gather solid data on our results. Despite our desire to do a better job, we stick with the much-criticized one-page survey of participants’ reactions. How can we get started without undertaking more than we can handle?

Think big, but take some small, carefully considered steps. Start with a conversation with your colleagues about what would be most useful to know with some certainty about your professional development programs. You don’t need to do everything at once. You just need to do something well to start changing the culture regarding program accountability.

Two ways to start evaluating professional development programs instead of just talking about it are to:

- Commit to evaluating one particular aspect of all of your professional development programs. For example, start monitoring what program participants actually learn. Or determine to find out what participants actually use in their classrooms as a result of the program.
- Select one important professional development initiative, using a framework or model that makes sense to you, and commit to monitoring it well over the next couple of years.

Probably the best payoff is to focus on three formative evaluation questions: “What are staff actually learning in this program?” “What are they using in their daily work?” and “What major hurdles are preventing staff from effectively using what they are learning?” Until you address those questions, you needn’t look for student results.

FAQ 3:
Our new board has begun talking about “return on investment.” Is this a concept or is there a way to measure this?

Return on investment (ROI) is both a concept and an evaluation model. The ROI is essentially the ratio of the program’s benefits to the program’s costs. Today, more and more stakeholders wonder aloud if a program’s costs outweigh the benefits.
We can calculate the costs of a professional development program fairly accurately. Calculating the benefits requires judging the monetary value of the short- and/or long-term changes that can be attributed to a program. For example, a program might be specifically designed to help teachers learn how to manage student behavior differently so that fewer students are sent to after-school detention. The various benefits of reducing or eliminating after-school detention would need to be assigned a dollar value to be able to compare them with the program's costs.


**FAQ 4:**

Our professional development team finds it difficult to find one solid source of information on program evaluation. What book do you recommend we read together?

No single book on professional development program evaluation covers everything on this topic. Remember, this is a relatively new field, and it is a hybrid. Some books on the market cover only one model while others highlight the whole gamut of models; some teach the reader specific measurement techniques, and others delve into the major issues and philosophies of evaluation.

Rather than read one book together, try this approach: Develop a short list of questions or issues in program evaluation to which you need answers. Keep the initial list short; you will discover other questions to investigate as you learn more. Have each team member read a book to learn how a particular author addresses each question or issue.

Next, discuss the questions one at a time and share what you each have learned. This dialogue should lead you to another set of questions, and you will find other experts to explore. Along the way, you may find it useful to shift from reading books to perusing published evaluation studies, which will not necessarily be exemplary research but will help you learn the array of approaches in program evaluation.

Here are eight books to consider using as you start your collaborative investigation:


**FAQ 5:**

Many program evaluations I read rely heavily on self-report data — opinions and perceptions expressed in focus groups, interviews, and surveys. Are people's perceptions really worthy of being called “solid evaluation” data?

Self-reports and other kinds of qualitative information have been heavily used in many program evaluations. Some people say they aren’t perfect, but they are better than doing nothing. They often have been called upon because they can be collected unobtrusively and generally do not require heavy use of statistics to tabulate, analyze, and summarize the findings. However, just as quantitative data, like student test scores, never give an accurate overall picture, qualitative data should be used with caution. One of the most appropriate uses of people's opinions and perceptions is to enlighten and amplify other data.

Consider this example of how the two kinds of data can be triangulated to figure out what is going on in a program and why it is happening. Your evaluation design calls for regular pop-in visits in a sample of classrooms of teachers who have been participating in a major professional development program aimed at changing how students learn to problem solve. You also have examined samples of student work using a problem-solving rubric that teachers have learned. Your analysis of the classroom observation data and the student work samples lead you to question how well and how often teachers are using the new approach, and to what extent students use it as they do their problem-solving assignments. To help you better understand these more quantitative results, you might find it worthwhile to interview or conduct focus groups with a sample of teachers and a sample of students. Qualitative (anecdotal) data help you tell the story of what is happening in human terms.