
The World of Evaluation: Challenges Faced by Student Evaluators

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Background: Performing a high-profile evaluation in a world-class organization is a daunting experience for any professional program evaluator. As a student evaluator, it is more than just formidable; It has distinctive challenges. Fortunately, professional undertakings provide student evaluators with the experience and tools to overcome these early tests with continuing practice.

Purpose: This paper discusses the challenges that student evaluators face in performing their first program evaluation project. It will draw from the experience of one student's first major evaluation project and current, but limited, research on the subject.

Setting: N/A

Intervention: NA

Research Design: This paper will examine the broad-spectrum of challenges that student evaluators experience in their first assignment referencing as a case study an actual evaluation of a hospital risk-assessment program implementation.

Data Collection and Analysis: Literature review and documented evaluator experiences.

Findings: This paper will conclude with a discussion of possible mitigation strategies to overcome these student evaluator challenges.

Keywords: *word a; word b; word c; word d.*

Introduction

Evaluators are expected to be “professional” in practice, so what does it mean to be a professional evaluator? The Canadian Evaluation Society (CES) describes a professional evaluator as one who must exert confidence, reliability, proficiency, and skill (CES, 2014). The characterization does not bode well, however, for a student evaluator with little to no experience in program evaluation. Communicating effectively with key organizational stakeholders requires confidence, which typically follows from developing evaluation skills and proficiency. It is an interesting conundrum for the student, as he/she completes the requirements of an evaluation curriculum, but may not possess the skills to be a successful evaluator right out of the gate. The notion, herein, is not that skills developed in undergraduate and graduate studies hinder one from performing as a professional evaluator, but that the student knows the differences between academic and applied skillsets and is able to bridge the gap in short order.

In a progressive effort for evolving student challenges in evaluation, we must first understand the nature of this academic practicum and its pedagogical influences on evaluation. The main objective of the field course is to broaden the student’s knowledge of evaluation methods and practice from educational resources and from the sharing of field-based experiences. Further, the practicum objective is to give students the opportunity to conduct a program evaluation under the supervision and guidance of a professor (J. Sylvestre, *Field Research in Social and Community Interventions*, January 2016).

There is no substitute for experience in the program evaluation domain. As students advancing to the firsthand world of evaluation, we are forewarned about the challenges that we will face as evaluators in real-life situations. We will need to recognize the disconnection between theory and practice and the differences between theory-dependent research and field-dependent evaluation. Further, we will need to accept our shortcomings when engaging with senior stakeholders, our absence of standing as evaluators, and our imperfect capacity to execute program evaluations during the school term. It is important to note that many program evaluation training programs include practical program evaluation projects. Therefore, it is important to expand on student challenges.

Notwithstanding the risk and issues associated with entering the real world of program evaluation, there are mitigation strategies that

could be employed to reduce the neophyte effect, such as apprenticing with evaluation organizations and working with university advisers. This paper discusses the challenges that student evaluators face in performing their first program evaluation project. It will draw from research and the experience of one student’s first major evaluation project.

Research Versus Evaluation

Program evaluation curricula are typically organized to provide information on an evaluation topic in classrooms each week that, as students, we can apply to our practicum projects. For example, I completed the course *Field Research in Social and Community Interventions* that included a program evaluation practicum. Each week we would discuss a theoretical concept such as implementation evaluation or contribution analysis and apply it to our project, as appropriate. We were required to practice the skills we learned in class as a part of professional development. Although there is limited research in the area, evaluations occurring at the graduate level have been known to have a “...disconnect that can sometimes occur between theory and real-world reactions” (Gredler & Johnson, 2001, p.100).

What is program evaluation? It seems that program evaluation is often confused with research. Undergraduate students and graduate students are taught research skills that are applied to refute a hypothesis or advance a theory, while program evaluation skills are needed to develop an understanding of what is going on within a subject or organization (Levin-Rozalis, 2003). This difference leads to the first challenge a student must face when conducting their evaluation practicum. Students must change the way in which they understand academic investigation.

Rather than relying on evidence-based theory and peer-reviewed articles, students must use their newfound analytic skills. Most commonly in research, students are expected to develop hypotheses, organize methods, and conduct a study. In program evaluation, however, students are expected to develop evaluative questions based on the needs of the program and the suggestions of key program stakeholders (Darabi, 2002). Gathering information about a program can prove to be considerably like performing a standard literature review. Both endeavors involve the systematic collection and analysis of ongoing and cumulative information, which should lead to asking suitable questions, setting realistic goals

and identifying relevant assessment methods. Nonetheless, if the program is not in the student evaluator's area of knowledge it can be a daunting task for the student to determine which activities are of utmost importance.

Although research and evaluation have similarities, it is the distinctive differences that prove challenging for students. In both areas, students can use their same knowledge of data collection tools, methods, analysis, and dissemination. The differences occur in the preliminary investigations and results. Research is theory-dependent and aims at developing scientific knowledge, while evaluation is field-dependent and aims at providing tangible feedback (Levin-Rozalis, 2003). Also, providing feedback is a new skill for student evaluators. Students are usually the recipients of feedback from professors and supervisors, not the advisories.

In my evaluation practicum, I was encouraged to pursue a program evaluation project that was in an area of academic interest. Rather than responding to a request for an evaluation, however, I proposed an evaluation project to a mental health program at a local hospital. Typically, this is not the case in the real world. Most evaluations come at the request of the organization itself. In contrast, a researcher or individual conducting a study is the one requesting an investigation (Shannon, Kim, & Robinson 2012). In my experience with this project, it may have been more effective if the hospital had been the one to make the request. In hindsight, I realized that the key stakeholders' interest was relatively low and may have been due to my initiation of the project — a general point of caution for future students.

Stakeholder Engagement and Respect

Stakeholder engagement is a necessary component of program evaluation (Brandon & Fukunaga, 2014). Students are expected to communicate with program directors, managers, supervisors, and team members. Most of these individuals are knowledgeable of the program and, therefore, it is the student's job to extract the information that is needed in order to develop the evaluation inquiries (Darabi, 2002). Students are often cautioned about the difficulties of engaging individuals in an organization as part of any evaluation. Program evaluation classes abound with discussions about how stakeholders are not always going to be forthcoming and supportive (Darabi, 2002). In fact, "...academic training makes it difficult for

students to involve clients in their evaluation plans and data collection methodology" (Darabi, 2002, p. 225). Therefore, classes that discuss participatory evaluation could prove to be the most helpful for students in need of information to engage program stakeholders.

Reflecting on my practicum experience, engagement with key program stakeholders had some challenges, such as actively participating in the evaluation and communicating to staff about their roles. Hospital management positions are very demanding, often having limited time to spend on non-operational matters such as university sponsored projects. Thus, in this case, it was understandable that the program director and chief of departments would trust in a colleague to absorb the task of supporting the evaluation and acting as the main program contact.

In the research literature, engaging key stakeholders takes significant time, effort, and training in order to command their respect (Cottrell et al, 2015). All things being equal — having a good reputation, relevant experience, and accreditation — it is more likely that program stakeholders will hire an internal evaluator rather than an external evaluator. The latter choice is clearly exacerbated when inexperience and student status with no professional reputation is factored into the decision. To be valued as a student evaluator would likely depend on the organizations experience conducting evaluations. According to Lishner and Puetz (1986), an evaluator's reputation is important when being considered in the selection process. Another important factor in the selection process is the evaluator's knowledge of the organization, the program, and the program material (Lishner & Puetz, 1986).

Fortuitously, the colleague tasked with supporting my evaluation of the mental health program was forthcoming and proactively engaged. One might call it a twist of fate because I was afforded extensive program information and inclusive experience. I can genuinely say that I was treated in a professional and respectful manner. Nonetheless, my experience was likely atypical for a student and that engaging key stakeholders can be an arduous task, as per our classroom discussions (J. Sylvestre, Field Research in Social and Community Interventions lecture, February 2016).

Project Scope and Quality

Significant challenges that a student evaluator might face are tight schedules and time

restrictions because of the university semester. Since an academic year is typically restricted to eight months and project deadlines often require more time it is difficult for a student to take on large-scale or long-term evaluation projects (Gredler & Johnson, 2001). Due to this fact, students must take these restrictions into consideration when determining the scope of any evaluation. The program may be evaluable and feasible, for example, but not feasible for the student to perform within a limited school term.

Determining the evaluability and feasibility of a program is an overwhelming task for any student because he or she may only possess the insight of their course material and academic readings. In my practicum experience, I took on a large-scale project that initially had a broader scope than was practically achievable for a course project. After some discussions and guidance from my instructor, I was able to narrow the scope of the project to focus on one aspect of the evaluation that could fit into my school schedule rather than the original design that was more elaborate and time consuming.

Even though the initial strategy and evaluation outcomes were not achieved, the scope and quality of a smaller aspect of the project was preserved. I had time to conduct a survey of ten nurses instead of the intended one hundred nurses and had time for several informal interviews as well. The interviews focused on using nurses' suggestions based on their training experience to write recommendations and to develop a future training manual.

Possible Mitigation Strategies and Conclusion

There are various strategies for students and professors to mitigate challenges faced by student evaluators. One consideration is to alter teaching methods of instructors. It might be more effective, for example, to provide students with a "...picture of the whole before they are asked to consider the pieces of any process or approach" (Darabi, 2002, p. 227). At one point in the preliminary stages of my course evaluation project, a stakeholder asked, "What is the next step in this process"? Assuredly, this question can cause a student evaluator to feel uneasy if it has not yet been covered in class. Thus, it would follow to consider stakeholder engagement challenges and mitigation strategies in the course prior to any project initiation.

It is a well-known fact that the higher the stakeholder involvement, the more successful the

evaluation outcome (Brandon, & Fukunaga, 2014). In addition, it is widely accepted that students view stakeholder engagement as their most challenging task in field projects (J. Sylvestre, *Field Research in Social and Community Interventions*, January 2016). Further research and documentation of actual case studies with actionable solutions will improve this area of knowledge for future students (Brandon, & Fukunaga, 2014).

Ultimately, students need to appreciate the guidance and support of their professors. The body of scholarly literature in the field of evaluation methodology offers an extensive amount of relevant information regarding new professional undertakings. Students are likely to have greater success in performing an evaluation with the close instruction of project supervisors (Shannon, Kim, & Robinson, 2012). Further, students could take on projects with the support of an evaluation expert or an expert in a particular social construct. Acquiring credentials through organizations such as the CES, for example, could benefit students with the appropriate graduate level degree or certificate. Unfortunately, the proviso here is that the CES (2014), requires "...evidence of two (2) years' (full-time equivalent) evaluation related work experience within the last ten (10) years" to even qualify for the accreditation. This begs the closing question and, perhaps, presents another significant challenge for student evaluators: how would they gain the requisite experience in order to apply for the accreditation and advance their employment opportunities?

One possible solution could be to count school program evaluation projects towards the requisite experience that might lead to being able to apply for accreditation. Another track may be to include an articling process in course curricula, similar to becoming a lawyer, to support an overall evaluation of an experiential training component leading to accreditation, including placement with an organization for two years with supervision by a Program Evaluation educator.

The need for research on student evaluators' experiences is one path to explore to bridge the student-experience-accreditation gap. But ultimately, it is more about growing the program evaluation profession as a whole. As Weiss (1988), a well-renowned evaluator researcher, would suggest, "Let us all strive to improve the quality of our evaluations...let us try to ask the right questions—the key questions—the pregnant questions—questions that have important implications for the future...Let us work to hone our methodological skills, our working-with-people skills, our understanding-of-program-life

skills, our capacity to understand and interpret what we find” (p.27). Students might heed the advice of Weiss, but the guidance of professionals,

educators, and rigorously following evaluation competencies and standards is paramount.

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