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# Using Competency-Informed Tasks to Guide Evaluation Capacity Strengthening

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**Background:** EvaluATE, a federally funded evaluation hub, offers an array of resources and activities to strengthen evaluation capacity. However, there were some gaps across the full range of tasks that evaluators and evaluation users need to know how to do. The team created a framework based on evaluation tasks to guide their future evaluation capacity-strengthening work, with the aim of offering resources for all essential evaluation tasks.

**Purpose:** The article explains the need for a context-specific, task-based evaluation capacity strengthening framework, the framework's relationship to the American Evaluation Association's Evaluator Competencies, how the framework is being used, and lessons learned.

**Setting:** The Advanced Technological Education (ATE) program funded by the U.S. National Science Foundation.

**Intervention:** EvaluATE, the evaluation hub for the ATE program.

**Research Design:** Not applicable.

**Data Collection and Analysis:** The evaluation task framework was validated through a task-tracking study, Delphi study, and expert review. Insights for this article are based on the authors' experience.

**Findings:** The main lessons learned for developing task-based frameworks to guide evaluation capacity strengthening include: (1) Be clear about the scope and purpose of the task list (for both internal and external audiences). (2) In addition to stating what must be done for a given task, say why. (3) Verify the appropriateness of the tasks with typical practitioners and experts within the programmatic context.

***Keywords:*** *evaluation capacity strengthening, evaluation capacity building, evaluation capacity development, evaluation competencies.*

"Evaluation capacity strengthening (ECS)"[1] refers to a set of actions in a specific context that aim to achieve a state where program evaluation is useful, high quality, part of an organization's culture, and sustainable (Labin, 2014; Schwarzman et al., 2019; Norton et al., 2016; Stockdill, 2002; Taylor-Powell & Boyd, 2008). In this Ideas to Consider article, we describe our centering of evaluation tasks in a new framework for planning evaluation capacity strengthening activities and resources. First, we discuss why a framework was needed in our context. Second, we explain why we chose to develop a task-based framework. Third, we discuss how we are using the framework to plan and prioritize ECS activities and resources. Finally, we share the lessons we learned for groups who wish to develop similar task frameworks to inform evaluation capacity strengthening efforts.

This work took place in the context of the National Science Foundation's Advanced Technological Education (ATE) program. The final framework, titled *Essential ATE Evaluation Tasks* (Robertson & Wingate, 2022) is available at evaluate.org/essential-ate-evaluation-tasks/. It includes 43 tasks across the following seven domains: management; engagement; planning and design; data collection and analysis; interpretation; communication, dissemination, and use of results; and quality review.

## The Need for a Framework to Plan Evaluation Capacity Strengthening

Located within The Evaluation Center at Western Michigan University, EvaluATE is the evaluation resource hub for the National Science Foundation's ATE program.[2] EvaluATE educates ATE program grantees and their project-level evaluators about evaluation.

To strengthen evaluation capacity among ATE project teams and evaluators, EvaluATE offers webinars and workshops; develops and disseminates various resource materials, such as checklists, quick-reference guides, and templates to guide evaluation practice and use; curates a blog; facilitates networking among community members; and conducts research on ATE evaluation practice. EvaluATE's webinars and resources are freely available to anyone, but its primary audience includes principal investigators (PIs), co-PIs, and other project staff members; evaluators; and grant professionals associated with about 360 ATE projects located in 49 states and three U.S. territories (ATE Central, 2023). The composition of EvaluATE's primary audience changes annually as some ATE projects expire and others start up. In addition, many projects experience turnover among project staff and evaluators within their three-to-five-year lifespans.

While EvaluATE's collection of resources addresses an array of topics that cover the lifespan of a typical evaluation, there are gaps in the content coverage. For example, many of EvaluATE's activities and resources focus on the front end of evaluation: finding an evaluator, developing evaluation plans, creating and using logic models, budgeting for evaluation, etc. The rationale for this emphasis is that doing these early tasks well sets the stage for a successful evaluation. However, we know that a successful evaluation requires more than strong front-end planning. To fill the gaps in EvaluATE's offerings in a systematic and intentional way, we EvaluATE staff decided that we needed a framework to serve as a guide for planning and prioritizing our evaluation capacity strengthening work.

## Centering Tasks

The American Evaluation Association's evaluator competencies are intended to "serve as a roadmap for guiding evaluator education and training and [encourage] critical self-reflection about the strengths and limitations of evaluators" (AEA, 2018, para. 1). Many evaluation scholars have called on evaluation educators to use AEA's evaluator competencies to guide the development of their evaluation education and training efforts (LaVelle & Galport, 2020; Stevahn et al., 2020; Tucker, 2021; Tucker & King, 2020). The competencies are widely viewed as an essential foundation for planning activities, textbooks, courses, and degree and certificate programs to educate students and working professionals about evaluation (Galport & Azzam, 2017; Ghere et al.,

[1] *Evaluation capacity strengthening* is synonymous with *evaluation capacity development* and *evaluation capacity building*. We prefer *strengthening*, as it more clearly acknowledges that those engaged in this work are not creating capacity from nothing, but rather expanding existing capacity (BetterEvaluation, n.d.; Tarsilla, 2014).

[2] The ATE program distributes about $75 million annually, mainly to community and technical colleges. The program supports an array of initiatives for improving the education of technicians in high-technology fields such as advanced manufacturing, biotechnology, energy and environmental technologies, and nanotechnologies (NSF, 2021).

2006; McGuire & Zorzi, 2005; Stevahn et al., 2005a; Stevahn et al., 2005b).

Thus, the AEA evaluator competencies were a natural starting place for planning the framework that would guide EvaluATE's ECS activities and resources. We even considered simply using the AEA evaluator competencies to guide EvaluATE's ECS work. Ultimately, we decided to create an ATE-specific ECS framework that centers tasks rather than competencies.

Before explaining the reasons for that choice, it's important to note the difference between competencies and tasks. Competencies relate to *knowledge, skills,* and *abilities* required to do a particular job (Wilcox & King, 2014). Tasks are *activities* that must be performed in a job. Specifically, a task is an "action designed to contribute a specified end result to the accomplishment of an objective. It has an identifiable beginning and end that is a measurable component of the duties and responsibilities of a specific job" (Murerwa, 2017, p. 37). The decision to place tasks in the forefront of EvaluATE's framework, rather than using the AEA competencies alone, was based on two key reasons specific to EvaluATE's contexts.

### *EvaluATE's Audience Includes Non-Evaluators*

EvaluATE's audience includes people with different roles who contribute in different ways to an evaluation (i.e., grants specialists, project leaders, and project staff, as well as internal and external evaluators). The task orientation of EvaluATE's framework allows us to approach ECS in ways that are inclusive of everyone involved in carrying out an evaluation, whether they identify as professional evaluators or not. Using the AEA competencies on their own as the main driver for EvaluATE's ECS activities and resources could lead to promoting competencies that, while important for professional evaluators, aren't pertinent to everyone in EvaluATE's audience.

For example, in the Professional Practice domain, AEA Competency 1.8 states that "the competent evaluator advocates for the field of evaluation and its value." This competency is not relevant to the priorities of non-evaluators (such as, e.g., grants specialists, project leaders, and project staff) who may be involved in evaluations, and it is not necessary for the skilled execution of an ATE evaluation. Therefore, this AEA competency is not reflected in our list of essential ATE evaluation tasks. In contrast, there are ATE-specific evaluation-related tasks that non-evaluators in the ATE context need to be aware of and know how to do. For example, all ATE grantees are required to develop and follow formal data management plans (reflected in ATE Evaluation Task 4.1) and report project data in multiple places in addition to evaluation reports (reflected in Task 3.10).

Many of the AEA competencies relate to essential components of a high-quality evaluation conducted in any context—such as determining evaluation questions (AEA Competency 2.2) and engaging a diverse range of users through an evaluation (AEA Competency 3.2). We were careful to ensure that these and other core evaluation activities were reflected in EvaluATE's framework.

### *A Task Orientation Aligns with How Self-Directed Learners Are Motivated To Learn*

Lindeman (1926), a pioneer in the field of adult learning, identified five key assumptions about adult learners. These assumptions have been validated and elaborated through research as the foundation for adult learning theory (Knowles, 1984a, 1984b; Knowles et al., 2020). The first two of these elaborated principles point to a need to provide adult learners with opportunities to learn *based on their immediate needs and situations*:

1. Adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that learning will satisfy; therefore, these are the appropriate starting points for organizing adult learning activities.
2. Adults' orientation to learning is life-centered; therefore, the appropriate units for organizing adult learning are life situations, not subjects. (Knowles et al., 2020, p. 22)

These theoretical principles are consistent with what we've learned from engaging with EvaluATE's audience. That is, our audience seeks out resources based on what they need to know about specific aspects of evaluations they are working on, such as creating an evaluation plan, developing data collection instruments, or working on a report. They attend webinars, watch videos, or download resources because they want guidance on a specific issue or challenge they are facing. Therefore, EvaluATE focuses material on specific tasks to keep the content as succinct and consumable as possible to meet our users' immediate needs and facilitate rapid, immediate use of the content. Many of EvaluATE's resources are intended to be just-in-time supports that can be used in the moment when performing a task.

For example, in the Context domain, AEA Competency 3.5 states that "the competent

evaluator communicates evaluation processes and results in timely, appropriate, and effective ways." We agree that communication is an essential competency for evaluation, along with other crosscutting professional skills included in the AEA competencies such as listening, facilitation, supervision, teamwork, technology, and conflict management. However, we recognize that the adult learners that EvaluATE serves are more likely to seek out specific guidance on evaluation reporting, for example, than to look for training in the broader subject area of communication. In EvaluATE's Communication, Dissemination, and Use of Results task domain, Task 6.1 is to "prepare reports that describe the evaluation's purpose, process, and findings to serve as a stable and credible source of information about the study." Separate tasks address developing a plan for communicating with decision makers and others (Task 2.2 in the Engagement domain), determining the optimal format and timing of reports (Task 2.5 in the Engagement domain), discussing results with stakeholders (Task 6.2 in the Communication, Dissemination, and Use of Results domain), and dissemination (Task 6.4, also in the Communication domain). The greater granularity of tasks allows EvaluATE to guide users to resources that meet their immediate needs.

## How EvaluATE Uses the *Essential ATE Evaluation Tasks* Framework

EvaluATE uses the framework to plan and prioritize its development of ECS activities and resources. A first step was a gap analysis. We took a high-level view of the task areas in which our current resources were concentrated, then identified which tasks our available resources corresponded with. We found that EvaluATE had heavily concentrated on front-end evaluation tasks related to staffing, budgeting, identifying evaluation questions, preparing evaluation plans, identifying indicators, and determining data sources and collection methods. EvaluATE has 15 or more resources for each of these front-end tasks. Reporting is also well-covered, with 18 EvaluATE resources. But 12 tasks had no associated resources, and 7 tasks are supported by just 1 resource each. Notable gaps relate to tasks having to do with contracting, sampling, context analysis, and facilitation of evaluation use.

Having completed the gap analysis, the next step will be to identify the tasks in most need of supporting resources. For this purpose, the EvaluATE team will consider the following key question: If Task X is done poorly or not at all, what is the risk to the overall quality of the evaluation? We will prioritize the development of ECS activities and resources that we deem most critical from this perspective. Eventually, we hope to have resources to support all essential ATE evaluation tasks.

### *Lessons Learned*

Other ECS organizations and initiatives may benefit from our experience developing a task-based framework to guide ECS work. To this end, we highlight three lessons learned regarding clarity of scope and purpose, task justification, and framework validation.

*1. Be clear about the scope and purpose of the task list (for both internal and external audiences).* We designed the ATE evaluation task framework to guide EvaluATE's work in offering ECS activities and resources. The information is not intended to be used as checklist for conducting an evaluation or as instructional material about evaluation. However, we have posted the task list on EvaluATE's website for transparency about how we decide what topics to address in our work—and for the benefit of others planning ECS activities. We included five important caveats within the document to guard against misuse or misinterpretation of the material. These points are important for defining the scope and purpose of the task list, and therefore bear including here verbatim:

- Although the tasks are numbered, they are not strictly sequential. Many tasks may occur simultaneously or iteratively.
- The tasks are written as actions that have a clear beginning and end, rather than as general considerations, competencies, or principles that should govern the entire evaluation process.
- External evaluators, internal evaluators, project leaders and staff, and others may be responsible for different evaluation tasks or aspects of tasks. The task statements do not specify who is responsible for each one, as this varies by project.
- The tasks convey what needs to be done in evaluation and, in most cases, why. They do not include details about how the work should be done. (EvaluATE provides guidance on how to do the tasks through its resources and activities.)
- Several tasks are framed as decisions, which must then be put into action. Decisions may need to be revisited to respond to challenges,

> opportunities, and needs that arise while an evaluation is underway. To avoid redundancy, the tasks do not include statements about putting decisions into action or revisiting them over time. (Robertson & Wingate, n.p.)

These clarifications are important for external consumers of the information. However, they also served as important reminders as we developed the task statements. For example, we were careful to avoid being prescriptive about *how* to conduct an evaluation. Likewise, we had to frequently reorient tasks so they were not tied to a specific role, such as that of an external evaluator. Based on our experience, our recommendations are to clearly define the purpose and parameters for the task list, use those parameters to maintain focus, and include those details if the material is shared with external audiences.

*2. In addition to stating what must be done for a given task, say why.* Each ATE evaluation task includes a rationale. This was an important safeguard against making unjustified assumptions about the necessity of any given task. It was not always easy to articulate the rationale for a task. For example, we realized that the reporting task lacked a stated rationale. We had to ask ourselves, What is the purpose of preparing evaluation reports? It's not simply to inform others about the results, because that can be done through other means. It didn't seem sufficient to say "for accountability," even though NSF expects evaluation reports to be submitted with a project's annual report. We finally determined the purpose of preparing a report is to "to serve as a stable and credible source of information about the study." That is, a report is more stable and carries more credibility in U.S. academic contexts than memos, videos, real-time discussions, or other informal ways of communicating results. Including a rationale for each task ensured that every task was truly essential.

*3. Verify the appropriateness of the tasks with typical practitioners and experts within the programmatic context.* We shared a first draft of the tasks with members of EvaluATE's advisory committee. They acknowledged the tasks had face value, but recommended we take steps to validate them. In response, we designed and conducted a year-long study involving ATE evaluators and project leaders. Each evaluator recorded their evaluation tasks weekly for one project over a year. The project leaders recorded their evaluation-related tasks monthly during the same period.

We used information provided by the task-tracking study participants to identify missing tasks and revise existing ones. For example, activities recorded by evaluators illuminated a need to define a task focused on documenting significant project changes and updating evaluation plans accordingly. In response, we added the following task (3.15) to the Planning and Design domain: "Document important changes in the project's staffing, activities, timeline, or implementation to contextualize findings and, if needed, substantiate changes in the evaluation plan." Several study participants also reported taking steps to ensure data could be accessed in a timely fashion (i.e., notifying institutional research offices of data requests ahead of time). Therefore, we created a new Planning and Design task (3.7): "If existing data are to be used in the evaluation, take steps to ensure timely access to needed information in a usable form (e.g., data-sharing agreements, fees, point of contact)."

Following the task-tracking study, we conducted a Delphi study with evaluators who had extensive experience—within and beyond the ATE context. In the first round of the Delphi study, experts indicated which tasks needed revision and identified missing tasks. In the second round, experts provided feedback on revisions we made to the framework based on the first-round results. The experts' feedback led to several changes to improve the clarity of the tasks. For example, we changed the phrase "prepare data for analysis" to "clean data" to increase specificity. We also added examples of issues someone may look for when cleaning data. The original and revised task statements are below:

> Original: "Prepare data for analysis to ensure that the data used are of adequate quality."
>
> Revised: "Clean data to ensure information is of sufficient quality for analysis (e.g., identify and correct or remove untrustworthy, improperly formatted, or duplicate information from a dataset)."

Based on feedback from one expert, we added an Engagement task (2.3) about educating project representatives about evaluation so that they can meaningfully contribute to decision-making: "Take steps to ensure people involved in evaluation planning fully understand the general purpose of evaluation and the range of options for focusing and conducting an evaluation so they can contribute meaningfully to decision-making."

Following the validation study and the subsequent revisions to the tasks, a draft version of the framework was reviewed by other EvaluATE

team members, including two with special expertise in equity, diversity, and inclusion in evaluation. The final version was edited by a professional copy editor.

## Summary

Centering tasks in EvaluATE's framework to guide our ECS work allowed us to (1) address important evaluation activities pertinent to non-evaluators involved in planning and carrying out an evaluation; and (2) set the stage for tagging and organizing resources and activities in a way that is consistent with how adult learners seek out resources.

We hope our insights and lessons learned are helpful for other organizations interested in developing frameworks to guide their own evaluation capacity strengthening work in ways that align with the AEA competencies.

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