CHAPTER 1

Introduction

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Topics Discussed

- Individual, Group, and Organizational Learning
- Learning Approach to Evaluation
- Least to Most Interactive Communicating and Reporting Formats
- Organization of the Book

Questions to Ponder

- ☐ *What is the relationship between learning and evaluation?*
- ☐ *What roles do communicating and reporting play in evaluation?*
- ☐ *What do we know about effective communicating and reporting?*
- ☐ *How can evaluation communicating and reporting support individual, group, and organizational learning?*

> *The proper function of evaluation is to speed up the learning process by communicating what might otherwise be overlooked or wrongly perceived. . . . Success is to be judged by . . . success in communication. . . . Payoff comes from the insight that the evaluator's work generates in others.*
>
> —Cronbach, 1982, p. 8

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Some 35 years ago, Lee J. Cronbach, one of the profession's most influential figures, wrote that, inherently, evaluation is about learning, and that the focal point for learning to occur is communication of the knowledge generated by an evaluation. For most practicing evaluators as well as theorists, evaluation is concerned with using systematic inquiry to yield some form of knowledge about a program, project, product, issue or concern, organization, or policy. Evaluation is also concerned with that knowledge being useful in some way. "The common denominator in all evaluation . . . is that it is intended to be both useful and used, either directly and immediately or as an incremental contribution to a cumulative body of practical knowledge" (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004, p. 21). In Patton's utilization-focused evaluation, "use concerns how real people in the real world apply evaluation findings and experience the evaluation process" (1997, p. 20). Describing responsive evaluation, Stake (2004) suggests that understanding is a determinant of use. "Users may go on to alleviate or remediate or develop or aspire, but the purpose of this evaluation is mainly to understand" (p. 89).

The goal of this book is to help evaluators facilitate understanding and learning among individuals, groups, and organizations by communicating and reporting more effectively. It will help full-time evaluators and others with evaluation responsibilities to successfully plan, conduct, communicate about, and report the findings of evaluations. It is a comprehensive book about communicating throughout the phases of an evaluation, from early planning stages through final reporting and follow-up; and it is grounded in an evaluation approach designed to help individuals and organizations grow and improve.

Effective communicating and reporting facilitates learning among stakeholders and other audiences. In our study of evaluators' communicating and reporting practices, we asked members of the American Evaluation Association to describe their most successful experiences (Torres, Preskill, & Piontek, 1997). They told us about using a variety of formats, including short reports and summaries tailored to audience needs. The reports and summaries they described were written in clear, jargon-free language, and the contents included graphs and charts; positive and negative findings; qualitative, contextual data as well as quantitative data; and specific recommendations. During and following the evaluation itself, they used ongoing, collaborative communication processes, involving stakeholders in the conduct of the evaluation as a whole, but especially in interpreting findings. In short, they spoke of techniques and strategies that helped audiences assimilate and use information from the evaluation.

Other research about evaluators' communicating and reporting practices produced similar findings (Piontek, 1994). During in-depth interviews, 19 veteran members of the American Evaluation Association stressed the importance of (1) meetings and informal conversations that create a context for dialogue,

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and (2) the use of interim memos and draft reports that focus on the perspective and language of the readers.

These findings about actual communicating and reporting practices echo what both the early literature on evaluation use (Alkin, 1985; Braskamp, 1982; Braskamp & Brown, 1980; Patton, 1986) and many of today's popular evaluation texts (Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2003; Joint Committee, 1994; Mertens, 2004; Patton, 1997; Posavac & Carey, 2003; Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004; Stake, 2004; Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2001) say about effective evaluation. That is, evaluators should

- Take into account the specific context of an evaluation.
- Identify the evaluation audiences, and involve them (the primary stakeholders, in particular) in designing the evaluation.
- Maintain frequent, close contact and report interim results throughout the evaluation.
- Tailor reports to audience needs, using a variety of formats that include short reports and summaries, verbal presentations, and opportunities for interaction.
- Present vivid, concrete illustrations of findings.
- Report results in a timely manner to a variety of audiences.
- Use clear, simple language.

Successfully implementing these strategies means overcoming constraints imposed by evaluation timelines and budgets, as well as the politics and complexities of organizational life. Not surprisingly, many evaluators report being dissatisfied with the outcomes of their communicating and reporting efforts (Piontek, 1994; Torres et al., 1997). We found, too, that experienced evaluators were somewhat more satisfied with their communicating and reporting efforts than those with less experience. This book is intended to support what evaluators learn from their own experiences by explicitly addressing the learning processes that mediate much of how users experience and benefit from an evaluation. Kushner (2000) reminds us that "to understand how to effect change we need to understand how people learn . . . evaluation is more or less, the study of people" (p. 201).

Individual Learning

How individuals receive, remember, and react to evaluation communications determines the effectiveness of those communications. The need for presenting information in a variety of modalities is clear. Adult learning theory maintains that individuals learn via their primary perceptual modalities: print, visual,

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aural, interactive, tactile, kinesthetic, or olfactory (Gardner, 1983; Pettersson, 1989). These theories suggest that some learn best through reading and writing; others through viewing videos, graphs, and charts; and yet others through listening or interacting. From a somewhat different perspective, and drawing on the work of Kurt Lewin, John Dewey, and Jean Piaget, Kolb's (1984) adult learning model describes four learning modes:

1. Those who learn best through *concrete experiences* do so by considering how successful they were at a task, and benefit most from hands-on activities, field work, observations, and role-plays.
2. *Reflective observers* learn best by stepping back from a task and thinking about what has been done and experienced. Instructionally, they benefit from demonstrations, videos, role-plays, keeping logs or journals, and brainstorming.
3. Those who learn best through *abstract conceptualization* look at events and attempt to understand the relationships among them. They like learning facts and enjoy creative theories to explain observations. They benefit from lectures, articles, videos, audiotapes, and the use of analogies.
4. *Active experimenters* process information primarily through their active engagement in an activity. They like using theories to solve problems and make decisions. They benefit from simulations, case studies, and handouts that can be used at a later time.

Consideration of adult learning theory poses an interesting question: How well do typical strategies for communicating and reporting accommodate different learning styles and modes? Many evaluators have had little time to expand the range of strategies they use beyond the traditional ones: comprehensive written reports, verbal presentations, and executive summaries. While these are not, in and of themselves, poor strategies, they can be more effective: first, when (as we describe in Chapter 3) they are developed in a way that makes their contents more appealing and easy to assimilate; and second, when combined with other, more interactive and creative approaches (see Chapters 4 and 5).

Group Learning

"Dissemination does not equate with use." This assertion is no less pertinent now than when Patton made it in 1986 (p. 278). One reason is that, as we have just mentioned, dissemination can often mean delivery of a final report

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or some other text-based evaluation product. Yet, participatory approaches to evaluation (see Cousins & Whitmore, 1998; Greene, 1988, 2001; Greene, Lincoln, Mathison, Mertens, & Ryan, 1998; King, 1998) are popular today precisely because they are based on significant degrees of interaction and opportunities for learning that pass between the evaluator(s) and the evaluation user(s). "It's the users, not the report that play . . . a critical role in the evaluation process" (King, 2004, p. 333). Constructivist learning theory proposes that learning is primarily about meaning making and suggests that individuals and groups learn by interpreting, understanding, and making sense of their experiences, often within a social context (Brookfield, 1991; Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Cranton, 1994; Dirkx, 1998; Jarvis, 1992; Mezirow, 1991).

Providing a social context for the interpretation of evaluation findings is one example of how group learning can support evaluation use. According to Wolcott (2001), "interpretation, by contrast [to analysis], is not derived from rigourous, agreed-upon, carefully specified procedures, but from our efforts at sense making, a human activity that includes intuition, past experience, emotion—personal attributes of human researchers that can be argued endlessly but neither proved nor disproved to the satisfaction of all. Interpretation invites the examination, the 'pondering' of data in terms of what people make of it" (p. 33). In Chapters 4 and 5 we describe how evaluators can provide users with opportunities for understanding, learning, and collaboration through working sessions and other creative forms of interactive communication.

Organizational Learning

Excepting some types of policy-oriented evaluation studies, most evaluations occur within some organizational context. This larger context is important because it typically exerts a significant influence on an evaluation, and because evaluation has the potential for impacting learning at an organizational rather than just a programmatic level. In our study of evaluators' communicating and reporting practices we found that evaluators were challenged by the following aspects of conducting their work within organizations: (1) lack of clarity among stakeholders about communicating and reporting needs; (2) unresponsiveness to communicating and reporting efforts; (3) client and audience turnover; (4) politically charged situations; (5) resistance to negative findings; (6) characteristics of particular individuals; and (7) misinterpretation of findings. Echoing the discussion of interactive learning above, some evaluators dealt with these challenges by taking a collaborative approach. Collaboration in evaluation is powerful: it enhances use by different audiences, it values individuals' experiences and opinions, it contributes to a sense of ownership,

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it produces better understanding and depiction of the context, it leads to more useful recommendations, it educates audiences about the program and evaluation, and it helps identify and resolve conflicts before the end of an evaluation. In essence, it embraces different perspectives and lets many voices be heard.

A collaborative learning approach to evaluation can support learning across the boundaries of a particular evaluand, thus invoking organizational learning. We define *organizational learning* as a continuous process of growth and improvement (1) that uses information or feedback about both processes and outcomes (i.e., evaluation findings) to make changes; (2) is integrated with work activities, and with the organization's infrastructure (e.g., its culture, systems and structures, leadership, and communication mechanisms); and (3) invokes the alignment of values, attitudes, and perceptions among organizational members. Organizational learning involves:

- Developing frameworks for relating findings about particular programs and initiatives to broader organizational goals.
- Sustaining a spirit of ongoing inquiry that calls for learning incrementally and iteratively over time.
- Providing time for reflection; examination of underlying assumptions; and dialogue among evaluators, program staff, and organizational leaders, and
- Reconsidering traditional evaluator roles and the skills evaluators need (Torres & Preskill, 2001).

Learning Approach to Evaluation

Success comes through communication and collaboration throughout the evaluation process and from the presentation of information in such a way that it is easily assimilated. Communicating and reporting are part and parcel of the entire evaluation endeavor—not something to be undertaken as final steps. We believe that successful communicating and reporting is most likely when undertaken as part of an overall evaluation approach that recognizes the role of individual, group, and organizational learning (Preskill & Torres, 1999). Figure 1.1 summarizes the phases of evaluative inquiry for facilitating individual, group, and organizational learning: focusing the inquiry, carrying it out, and applying learning.

Throughout these phases evaluators can use a variety of communicating and reporting strategies designed to facilitate individual, group, and ultimately organizational learning. Figure 1.2 shows the communicating and reporting formats presented in Chapters 3, 4, and 5, arranged according to

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Figure 1.1 Phases of Evaluative Inquiry for Facilitating Learning.

the extent of audience interaction they afford. Chapter 3 covers the text-based formats shown under "Least Interactive" in Figure 1.2. All these formats involve written evaluation products that can be delivered to audiences without interaction with the evaluator(s). That is, they can be delivered via mail (postal or intraorganizational system), e-mail, overnight delivery, the news media, or the Internet, without there ever being any verbal or face-to-face interaction with the evaluator(s) or other stakeholders. In these cases, what recipients glean from the evaluation document is based upon its

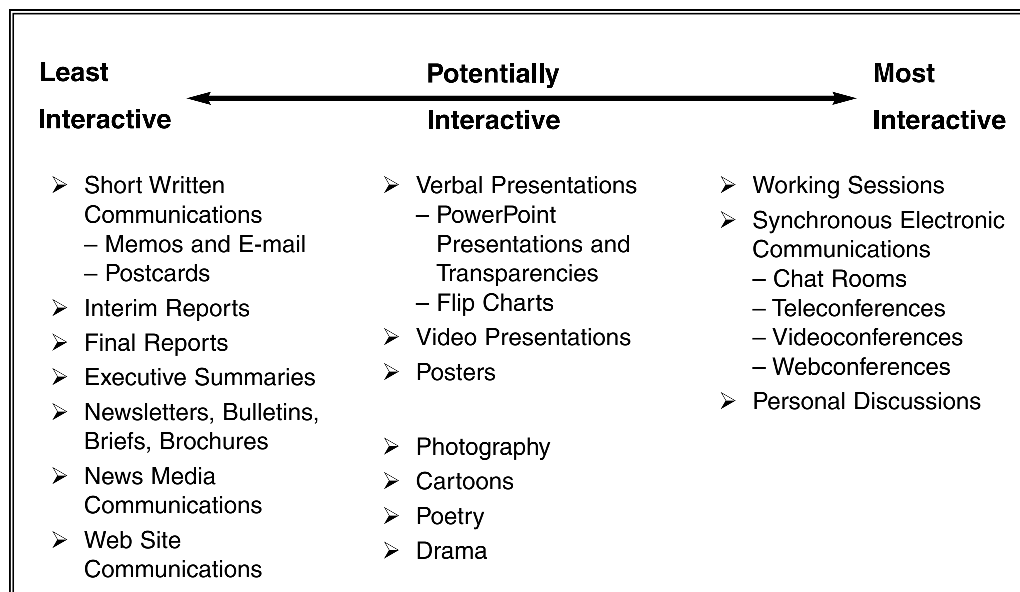

Figure 1.2 Communicating and Reporting Formats by Degree of Interaction With Audience

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contents, how much attention they give it, and how well the document itself helps them assimilate and understand the information it contains. Chapter 3 also provides information on how to enhance the design and layout of text-based evaluation products, how to use tables and figures, and how to write with clarity.

Many evaluation formats are potentially interactive, as described in the first half of Chapter 4. These are shown in the middle section of Figure 1.2. Verbal presentations, video presentations, and posters can all be delivered with or without interacting with audiences. This is also true of photographs and cartoons that might be included in the text of an evaluation report. On the other hand, a poster containing either could be part of a poster session facilitated by the evaluator to explain the illustrations and solicit reactions from the audience. Similarly, poetry and drama can be used to depict the evaluand, its context, or the evaluation findings. A poem constructed to represent the essence of participants' experiences in a program could be included in a report delivered to stakeholders. It could also be part of a presentation and discussion where participants themselves read the poem, and the audience is invited to respond. A dramatic performance about evaluation findings can be performed in the same way that most theatrical performances are held for entertainment. The audience attends and witnesses the play, but there is no prearranged interaction between audience members, or between audience members and actors, about the contents of the play, specifically. Dramatic performances about evaluation findings can also include significant opportunities for interaction between actors and audience members. Chapter 5 provides detail on all four creative formats: photography, cartoons, poetry, and drama.

Fully interactive formats, shown on the far right of Figure 1.2, include working sessions that are specifically designed for participants to collaborate, discuss, and quite often make decisions about any given aspect of a program or its evaluation. Synchronous electronic communications (chat rooms, teleconferences, videoconferences, Web conferences) occur in real time and provide the opportunity for participants to interact across different geographical locations—whether it is across the building, within the same city or country, or across the world. Finally, discussions between two individuals are inherently interactive, whether they occur over the telephone, via an Internet chat room, or in person. Over time, use of these interactive strategies to facilitate dialogue and reflection within a particular organizational context can contribute to a cumulative body of knowledge that informs issues and decisions related to broader organizational goals.

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Organization of the Book

In the foregoing discussion we have outlined the contents of Chapters 3, 4, and 5, which present approximately 29 different strategies for facilitating learning for individuals and groups. Chapter 2 provides the background for understanding and planning for effective communicating and reporting. It covers the purposes, timing, audiences, and learning processes involved in successful communicating and reporting, as well as detailed guidance for creating a communicating and reporting plan. Chapter 6 addresses various issues and challenges that evaluators face: communicating and reporting for diverse audiences, communicating negative findings, integrating quantitative and qualitative findings, developing recommendations, and communicating and reporting for multisite evaluations. Chapter 7 addresses a number of persistent issues. We look at topics such as evaluator roles, organizational readiness for learning from evaluation, and time for collaboration.

The book can be useful to readers in a variety of ways. Reading Chapters 1 through 7 in sequence provides an integrated approach to working more effectively in organizations. Those who want immediate help in using different communicating and reporting formats can begin with any of Chapters 3, 4, 5, or 6, each of which provides implementation tips, cautions, and examples for each strategy. The homepage for this book on the Sage Web site (http://www.sagepub.com/escr) provides color versions of many of the examples.

Finally, readers should be aware that our views are primarily informed by local program evaluation experience as opposed to large-scale, federal-policy-oriented evaluations. Some readers may find some aspects of the collaborative learning approach to evaluation we describe here more applicable for evaluations conducted within organizations than for those conducted to inform policy at a broad level. We trust, however, that the perspectives and strategies discussed in this book will stimulate reflection, conversation, and growth for evaluators practicing in a variety of settings.

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