

Evaluation as a Tool for Success

Session II: Data Collection Methods

This session took place via Zoom on May 10, 2022. A recording of the session along with relevant resources is available at <https://njhumanities.org/programs/in-the-weeds/>. These notes provide a summary of topics discussed in the session.

Workshop facilitators:

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What to collect and when to collect?

- Once you have determined the central questions you wish to evaluate (session I in this series, Introduction to Evaluation, focuses on planning for evaluation), it is time to determine the best method to collect the data you need.
- For today's session, we have divided methodologies into two types: interactive methods and observational methods.
 - Interactive methods. Ex: surveys, focus groups, interviews
 - Focus on the impact the program had on the participants
 - Rely on gathering written or verbal feedback from participants.
 - Can be done over long time period – from during or immediately after program to years after.
 - Observational methods. Ex: audience observation, timing and tracking, interactive program components, spatial analysis.
 - Focus on how the audience interacts with the program in real time.
 - These methods most often done while the program is happening.
- All these methods are valuable evaluation tools.
 - Need to fit the tool to the data you wish to collect.
 - There are pros and cons of all tools and methods.
- Many more methods exist beyond those we have time to discuss today.

Interactive methods

- Surveys allow you to easily collect large amounts of data quickly, but you lose out on deeper understanding of how participants felt about the program
 - Need to distribute to large number of people because only small percentage will respond.
 - Responses tend to be short – people don't write long answers.
- Focus groups allow you to hear about experiences in detail.
 - Usually 5-10 people per focus group. Each group meets for 1-2 hours.
 - Moderator sits with the group and ask questions to get to deeper meaning.
 - Time consuming for the evaluator and respondents so it can be tough to get people to devote the time to participate. May also skew your sample, as certain demographic groups will likely have more availability than others.
 - Getting equal participation from all people in the room can be tough, especially if someone in the focus group tends to dominate conversation. Relies on moderator to create a balanced dynamic and encourage equal participation.
 - Moderator must be well-trained to ask questions in neutral way so as not to influence the response.
- Interviews allow you to get one-on-one information from a person or organization
 - Take place with one person at a time or perhaps 1-2 people from one organization.
 - Provides a rich and detailed account of the interviewee's experience.

- Time consuming in terms of conducting interviews, especially to conduct multiple at a time. Also time consuming to write up transcripts or notes from each.
 - Again, important to consider how questions are asked to not influence the response.
- In all interactive methods, who is asking the questions can impact responses.
 - Anonymity can make people feel more free to respond honestly.
 - Same if the surveyor/interviewer is not from the organization requesting feedback.

Observational methods

- Visitor/Audience Observation: designating someone to observe visitors or audience members and collect information based on what they observe.
 - Commonly used to collect demographic information, observe how audience reacts to a presentation, how people move through space, etc.
 - Critical to have clear guidelines on what evaluator is to observe and how to report it.
 - Relies on good training for people doing the observation.
 - Observations are always impacted by points of view and biases of the observer (to positive and negative effect).
- Timing and Tracking: designating someone to watch how person moves through a space and how long they spend doing a particular activity.
 - For example, watching how museum visitors move through an exhibit and how long they spend looking at a particular display.
 - Can help evaluator learn where people tend to spend time and where they don't.
 - Can help determine if additional wayfinding is necessary.
- Spatial Analysis: determining how the set up and space in the room/exhibit impacts visitor experience.
 - For example, participation in discussion programs increased when chairs were set up in semi-circle rather than straight rows, as it enabled people to see and respond to each other more effectively.
 - How much space people have to move around can significantly change their willingness to participate and their response to a program.
- Interactive program components: creating opportunities for people to leave their reactions in real time.
 - Requesting feedback during a program or during a visit. For example, asking people to vote on a question by placing a marble in one jar or another.
 - Creating a way for people to leave comments or responses to a prompt, such as with a sticky note or on a chalkboard. Evaluator can collect these responses for analysis on a regular basis.
 - Use the space to gather information about visitors. For example, at Eastern State Penitentiary, they have a dual entryway that asks people to go through one side if they have been impacted by incarceration and the other side if they have not. (ESP is a museum housed in a former penitentiary that interprets the past and current state of incarceration).
- These types of methods can be particularly useful for answering simple questions and/or figuring out where you want to gather more information.

Mixed methods/hybrid models

- Combining evaluation methods can be particularly useful.
- Examples:
 - Timing and tracking to see how people move through space when exhibit opens; follow up with survey or focus group to determine why they spent time in one place and not another.

- Accompanied visits involve working with a particular population you wish to engage to determine a time when they will be accompanied on a visit or invited to attend a program. Discussion prompts circulated ahead of time are discussed throughout the visit. Feedback can be collected afterward.
 - Good for reaching those target populations that your organization may not usually interact with.
 - Also allows you to track demographics and receive survey feedback immediately.

Embedding Assessment Throughout the Project

- When choosing methodology, it is equally important to determine WHEN throughout the project to stop and collect data.
- Longitudinal data is the same data collected over time.
 - Need to determine when and how often you are going to collect the same data to be able to see change over time.
 - Different collection methods may be needed at different times. For example, can have an individual collect in-person surveys after a program, but if you want to go back to those same people a year later, you probably won't send that individual to their house! May use a digital survey instead.
- Can also collect data before and after a program to determine knowledge or experience gained (pre- and post-test approach).
 - Some data it easier to collect during program v. immediately after programs v. months or years after the program. Different methods might be needed at different points.
- Gathering demographic data helps you understand who is in your sample and who is not.
 - Demographic data you collect can be compared to existing data sets (census, city info, state info).
 - Often helpful for funders!
- Always return to your evaluation plan: align your methods with what you are trying to collect.
 - Ex: if a primary goal for your program is to reach a particular demographic group, it's very important to collect demographic information.
 - Ex: knowing if someone liked your program may not help you determine if it impacted them.

Considerations for Effective Evaluations

- You cannot evaluate everything at once.
 - Keeping a narrow scope will lead to more complete and useful data.
 - Be realistic with what your time, budget, and methods will allow you to collect.
- Focus on understanding impact and reach based on your programmatic goals.
- Be flexible and ready to revise-it's an iterative process.
 - Think of evaluation as a living document that can change.
 - Have a contingency plan and be ready to pivot if possible.
- Embedding evaluation into your program development and design process means you will always have new things to evaluate.

Meet with Us!

If you wish to schedule a 1:1 session with facilitator Montrell Sanders to talk through evaluation needs or review materials, times are available through July 31, 2022. Email msanders@njhumanities.org to schedule.