

Evaluating an evaluation course

Jenny Neale, John Owen and Karilyn Andrews

Jenny Neale

jenny.neale@vuw.ac.nz

Victoria University of Wellington

John Owen

j.owen@unimelb.edu.au

The University of Melbourne

Karilyn Andrews

Victoria University of Wellington

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Note: The original analysis for this evaluation was undertaken by Karilyn Andrews and the primary audience for the findings are Drs Neale and Owen who presented the course which is the subject of this evaluation study

Abstract

Evaluation has had a fairly limited life as a discipline area in New Zealand (NZ). There are a number of programmes at tertiary institutions in Australia but only scattered courses in NZ. The Australasian Evaluation Society (AES) has a training strategy and the annual conference provides workshops that cover current areas where there have been advances or controversies. This paper reports on a course run in NZ, titled 'Program Evaluation; Concepts and Practices', adapted from one that is offered as part of the Master of Assessment and Evaluation at The University of Melbourne. The course has been run five times in NZ. The evaluation reported here is of the most recent course that had a combined enrolment of those who were working in the field of evaluation and students taking the course for credit at Victoria University. Issues with format, and ideas for subsequent training are explored. The relationship of such courses to adult learning is also discussed.

Introduction

Evaluation has had a relatively limited life as a disciplinary in New Zealand. In comparison to Australia where there are distinct qualifications and programmes that cater for the professional development and training of evaluators, New Zealand offers courses that are part of related qualifications and one-off workshops that take advantage of available expertise. The majority of people who carry out evaluations in both the public and private sector or in academe have come from other disciplinary bases and have used a mixture of practice and available courses to further their evaluation knowledge. However, this is not necessarily a disadvantage as Perrin (2003) points out that "it can be at least as important for an evaluator to have interpersonal and communication skills as to have technical research skills (p236)." Further, there is a need to ensure that the highest standards of practice are fostered and maintained in a climate where the need for and number of evaluations of policy, practice and programmes are increasing.

The course

A version of “Program Evaluation: Concepts and Practice” has been offered four times in Wellington. Initially the course was offered as part of an AES Pilot Training Strategy. The Centre for Program Evaluation at Melbourne University presented the first course as the result of a competitive tendering process. Subsequent courses were presented in association with Victoria University of Wellington and catered for a mix of students and those working professionally in the area of evaluation. The most recent course was held in April 2004 and the course presenters were the two first authors of this paper (Neale and Owen). Our paper reports on the evaluation of this course and explores to what extent the aims of the course were met as well as suggestions participants made for improvements. .

Teaching Methods:

To achieve the objectives of the program, a teaching approach was used that included the course being “oriented towards practical issues which are of relevance to real and current problems found in the workplace” (Owen, 2004,) as well as “(c)onceptual frameworks (being) provided that will help make more sense of existing practice” (Owen 2004). It was based on adult learning principles, thus enabling the use of a case study “to introduce and reflect on key evaluation concepts and frameworks” along with the “emphasis on group work throughout the course” (Owen, 2004).

Program Participants:

There were 24 participants on the course. Eleven were students on the MA (Applied) in Social Science Research programme at Victoria University and the remaining thirteen were practitioners, predominantly working in the public sector. This latter group entered the course via Victoria University’s Centre for Continuing Education and Executive Development, Te Whare Pukenga (CEED).

Broadly these two groups fitted the courses’ intended target audience, viz. people who have some experience in evaluation, were intending to undertake evaluation work, or have a responsibility for evaluation studies and for those with experience in related areas such as policy development and analysis.

Study design

This evaluation is primarily an Impact Evaluation (Owen 1999, p.39) occurring at an end point after the course has taken place. Impact evaluations seek to assess the impacts of a particular program (Owen, 1999, p.47), and are concerned with outcomes, which “are benefits for participants during or after their involvement with a program. Outcomes relate to knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, behavior, condition or status” (Owen p.264). The current evaluation sought to provide information to satisfy the different criteria set by the two stakeholder groups.

All participants took part in the evaluation. Toward the end of the last day of the course, two evaluation instruments, were administered, one on behalf of CEED and

the other from the course presenters – John Owen and Jenny Neale reflecting the somewhat different orientation of those initiating them.

A total of 47 questionnaires were completed as one practitioner only filled out the questionnaire from CEED. Participants were given the option of making their submissions anonymous, but were asked to indicate whether they were students or non-students. They were also told that another course participant, (the coauthor Andrews, would be initially writing up the evaluation for assessment purposes). With this knowledge, participants then made their choice as to whether they disclosed their names on the two questionnaires; 18 participants did so.

After the questionnaires were completed, the course presenters facilitated a discussion where participants had an opportunity to give verbal feedback about the course. The data that forms the basis of this evaluation comes from both sets of questionnaires, and the feedback session.

Evaluation Measures

Owen raises the point that “(t)he translation of program goals or objectives into valid measures of outcomes is a major methodological issue” (1999, p.267). Not all methods and instruments employed to collect data for measuring program objectives may in fact achieve these ends. The participant feedback questionnaires, used for data collection in this instance accord with the Kirkpatrick Four-Level Approach (Kirkpatrick, 1998, p.3). This is a “conceptual framework (that) assists in determining the types of data to collect” (Phillips, 1997, pp. 38-39). The emphasis of the questionnaires was on knowledge acquisition of participants and their expected use of the knowledge. This type of evaluation can ascertain “how relevant participants thought the training was...whether they were confused by any of the training...point out any areas in which trainees thought information was missing...tell us how favorable overall participant reactions were” (Krein & Weldon, 1998, p.17).

FINDINGS: Knowledge and Understanding of Evaluation Principles

Participants were asked to rate their knowledge and understanding of evaluation principles on a scale where 1 was low and 10 was high. The questionnaire asked them to rate their knowledge level both before and after the course so that some indication of the effect of the course could be made.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the range of Practitioners responses about their beginning knowledge was from 2-8 compared to the Student range of 0–6. The Practitioners range reflects their diverse experience, from that of senior evaluators, to those just becoming involved in evaluation practice. The Student responses also reflect a range of experience.

Figure 1

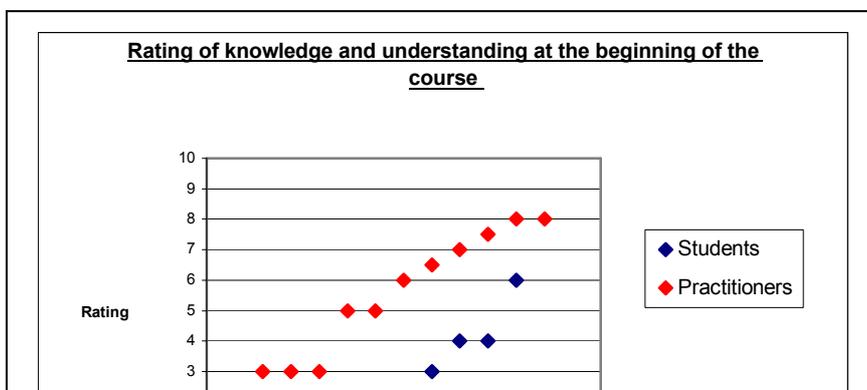
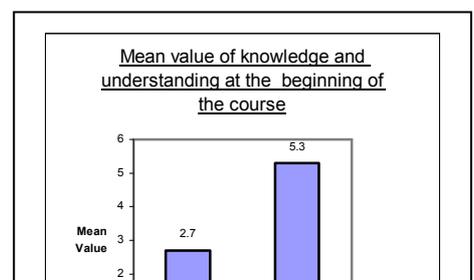


Figure 2



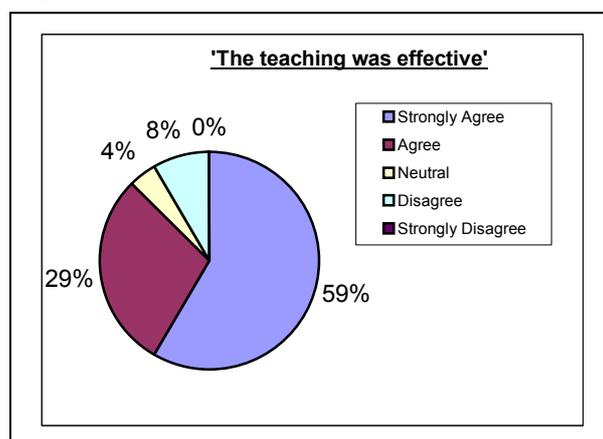
principles, and abilities to commission and/or carry out evaluations between Students and Practitioners. Kirkpatrick would argue that this however would be an incorrect deduction, because no actual measurement of learning has taken place, but rather only the measurement of perception (1998, p.4). Phillips however makes a case for self-assessment by participants of their learning, arguing that “(i)n many applications, a self-assessment may be appropriate, by which participants are provided an opportunity to assess the extent of skills and knowledge acquisition” (1997, p. 131). Whilst it is possible that participants are good judges of their own learning, it is still not evidence that Practitioners and Students per se, have the same knowledge and understanding in regard to evaluation principles, nor the same abilities in commissioning and/or carrying out evaluations.

Furthermore, these results do not measure actual changes in participants, in terms of what is demonstrated in terms of on the job behaviour. This is the job of a Level Three evaluation (Kirkpatrick, 1998, p.5), which essentially attempts to measure the ‘transfer of training’ (Garavaglia, 1998, pp.74-77), from the course to the actual work place, or practice (Kirkpatrick, 1998, p.5). Such evaluations are however not straight forward as it is difficult to isolate effects from courses from other contributing factors to changes (Kirkpatrick, 1998, p.7, Kirkpatrick, 2004, p.10.11, Queeney, 1996, p.719).

The results that have been presented in this section are evidence however, that as a result of participating in the course, participants perceive that their knowledge, understanding and abilities have increased with regard to evaluation principles, and in commissioning and/or carrying out an evaluation.

Effectiveness of Teaching

Figure 9



Overall 88% (21) of participants either Strongly Agreed or Agreed with the statement that the teaching was effective.

Group Work

More Students than Practitioners commented on group work, and for the most part, the Students were very positive about it, both in terms of the exercises themselves, and the benefits of working in groups. One made the point that ‘(g)roup activities

involving all members in producing work in a given time frame an excellent way to learn'. Other students indicated that they felt there were benefits to be gained from the group work because of the experience Practitioners brought eg. "I felt that the group exercises were very beneficial as I learnt a great deal from talking to those involved in the evaluation industry'. These comments suggest that using this teaching approach was clearly useful for Students, as it is based on adult learning principles, where, as Knowles has acknowledged, '(a)dults bring into a learning situation a background of experience that is itself a rich resource for many kinds of learning for themselves and for others (1996, p.256). A Practitioner agreed, stating that they "(f)ound the exercise working in the groups most useful because group members had prior knowledge of evaluation' suggesting that Students were not the only ones who thought they could benefit from others experience.

However, Students felt that the Practitioners in the groups were not always useful. For example, one Student commented that "(a)t times there was a tendency within the two groups that I was in for the 'workers' to privilege their own knowledge over the students which was actually unfounded at times. Students had valid life experiences that were a valid contribution.' Knowles explains that "if adults' experience is not respected and valued, is not made use of as a resource for learning, they experience this omission not as a rejection of their experience but as a rejection of themselves as persons" (1996, p.256). Further to this, at least one Practitioner expressed that the 'mix of students and experienced evaluators did not work well, the course was pitched too low for those with some experience with the result that some sessions were not very productive or dragged.' They thought that '(m)ore teaching would have been better.' Both of these participants' views suggest that the diversity of experience levels within the group context was problematic for some, and not necessarily a positive experience in all cases and circumstances.

Other Practitioners alluded to tensions in group dynamics, but they did not specifically attribute them to the Student/Practitioner mix. 'I really enjoyed it, though some of the group discussions got a bit too intense at times.' Another implied, albeit indirectly, that not all groups may have been smooth sailing, '(t)here was a large proportion of class time devoted to group work, we were lucky that our group got on well and was productive.'

Some of the Student commented that although group work may have been enjoyable or useful, at times there were preferences for a greater mix of teaching methods. For example, '(e)xcellent practical exercises for groups to engage in. I would have liked some more individual exercises at times' from one, and '(e)njoyed the group work, although sometimes working in pairs was more efficient.' One Student however did not like group work at all, and '(w)ould have liked more structured class time. I personally don't like/respond well to interactive group situations. Often one or two people will dominate".

The group work essentially involved participants in practical exercises, and was predicated on adult learning principles, enabling participants to "tap into the accumulated knowledge and skills of the learners" (Knowles, 1996, p. 256). Overall more Students than Practitioners commented positively about the group exercises and the benefits gained. In terms of the actual group work, the majority of Practitioner

comments, like those of Students were positive. In discussing the use of interactive learning techniques Thiagarajan notes that

(t)hese instructional techniques are based on two important premises: (1) People learn better through active experiences than passive listening; and (2) people learn better through interacting with one another than working alone (1996, p.517).

There is evidence (Harbour 1998) that group work has been rated as one of the most favoured instructional methods, reiterating the positive reception of this aspect.

Knowles (1996), Thiagarajan (1996), and Harbour (1998) all emphasise people's active participation in their own learning. The use of groups to achieve this in the context of the course was not without its tensions. These mainly related to group dynamics, with the intensity of discussions/arguments noted by one participant, and others noting the potential for some members to dominate as well as the invalidating of Student experience and knowledge. Other methods were seen to be more effective for some tasks.

Theory and Practice

A major component of the teaching approach of the course was its practical nature, and orientation towards issues that are of relevance to the workplace with conceptual frameworks helping to make more sense of existing practice.

The participants who commented about this teaching approach using both theory and practice in tandem were predominantly Practitioners and all were overwhelmingly positive about the approach. Students tended to comment about either practice or theory as separate components. Practitioners commented that it was a 'good mix of practical and theory', and a 'good, quick 'snapshot of evaluation theory and practice'. One thought that 'it was hands on, with theory supplementing what was learned during workshop sessions' and that it '(p)rovided a very good outline of evaluation concepts and the issues arising from evaluations'. Whilst another considered there were '(e)xtrremely well designed practical exercises – the best I've ever seen in a course.'

A Student also commented on the exercises noting the '(s)trong focus (through the activities) on applying knowledge'. They thought it was a good approach for the course and appropriate for participants because they perceived that in the New Zealand context there was 'quite a lot of evaluation projects being commissioned and few experienced evaluators.' They also thought the Course Notes were well linked with the activities, which illustrates a point that Phillips makes in regard to training, in that hand out materials "can support the information presented in the program and provide for additional analysis and follow-up when the participant is back on the job" (1997, p.293).

Participants described a learning environment created by the instructors where the course was '(v)ery well presented in a relaxed pleasant manner', with a '(g)reat teaching style. I was focused and attentive most times.' Another commented that 'it was lively and interesting. The tutors were easy with the class and it was most enjoyable.' John Owen was described as 'a good facilitator', 'an excellent

tutor/presenter.’ The team approach to teaching was noted; ‘Jenny and John worked very well as a team’, and that it was ‘good having both teachers as it kept up the interest.’

Students and Practitioners commented equally positively about the instructors’ knowledge and expertise. A Student noted that because the teachers ‘were well experienced in their field of expertise’ it made ‘it more of a transfer of knowledge than if it had all been theory based.’ Participants found the real life examples very valuable. For example, the practical “real life” examples of the peaks and troughs of evaluation at all stages was especially enlightening.’ “Analogies also help increase training transfer, by showing how important principles can apply in various situations” (Garavaglia 1998, p.76).

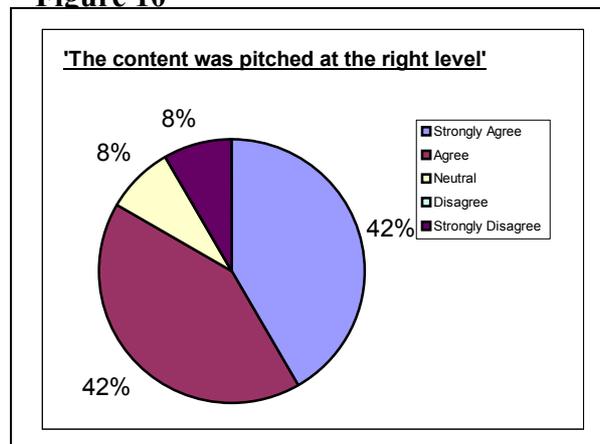
Comments about the quality of the course, and the teachers were positive and reinforce Harbour’s findings that

The ability to create a learning environment was judged the most important characteristic, with competency in the subject matter coming in a close second. (1998, p.119).

Content Pitch

Overall 84% of the course participants indicated that they either Strongly Agreed or Agreed with the statement that the content was pitched at the right level.

Figure 10



Some of the Students were unsure what that would mean in terms of it being pitched well for Practitioners eg. ‘(f)or me being new in the field. For other experienced practitioners it may have been a bit basic.’ However, responses such as ‘(f)ound it very useful, especially from a practitioner point of view’, ‘catered to the diversity of the participants – both in terms of their knowledge and their experience’ suggest that for some Practitioners the course was indeed pitched right

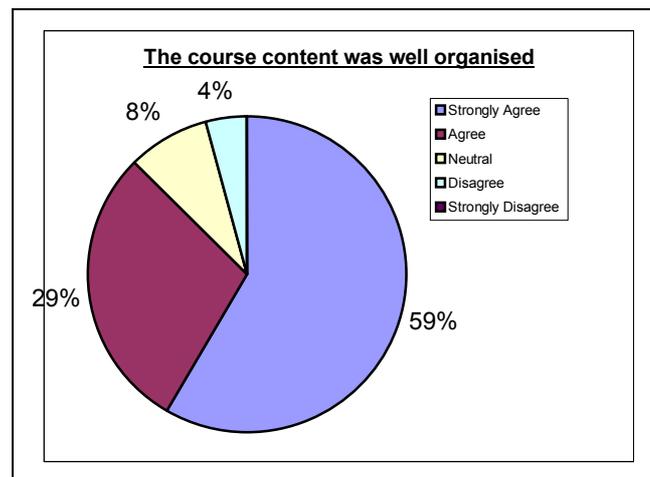
One Student commented, “because the class had varying levels of expertise – some were more out of their depth”. A Practitioner responded in a similar vein, noting that the ‘(v)ariety of participants’ experiences means not everyone will agree’ in regard to whether content was pitched right.

Generally the feedback suggests that the course was pitched well for the majority of the participants, both Practitioners and Students. Comments from both questionnaires revealed that on either end of the continuum of participants, there were issues regarding the pitch of the content. Students with minimal knowledge of the subject prior to the course felt that it was pitched too high, and very experienced Practitioners, with a number of years experience as evaluators, felt it was pitched too low.

Content

Figure 11 shows that 86% of all participants on the course Strongly Agreed or Agreed with the statement that the course content was well organised.

Figure 11



The majority of Practitioner responses related to professional development needs that they perceived they had, and have for the future. The examples illustrate that “(i)deally this education enables practitioners to keep abreast of new knowledge, (and) maintain and enhance their competence” (Queeney, 1996, p.699). For example, one Practitioner stated that

(t)he course was an excellent coverage of the field, and allowed me to refresh my knowledge of where evaluation had developed and where the basic principles had remained fairly stable . . . Confirmed me in what I know and areas where I needed to improve or develop new skills such as use of software programmes for quantitative analysis.

A Student also commented that they were also now more comfortable in terms of carrying out a small scale evaluation, and that they were ‘(r)eally impressed with the amount of content squeezed into this week.’ A fellow Student felt that the ‘application of content has been steady and at a good pace. My interest in evaluation has increased.’

Participants rated the course highly both in terms of the overall quality of the course and in giving the course an overall assessment. The mean participant rating of the overall quality of the course was 8 on a 10 point scale, and 79.5 % of participants rated the course overall as either Excellent or Very Good.

Key Findings

Overall participants perceived that their knowledge and understanding of evaluation principles, and their abilities to commission and / or carry out an evaluation increased as a result of participating in this course. The mean increase was 30% and 31% respectively.

Eighty-eight percent of the participants 'Agreed' or 'Strongly Agreed' that the teaching was effective. Participants were unanimous in their praise of the course instructors, particularly liking their expertise and real life examples and anecdotes, as well as their general manner and open approach.

Group work was a major component of the teaching approach of the course, and Students that commented were particularly focused on the benefits of the method in terms of gaining from the experience which others, particularly the Practitioners, brought to the groups. Practitioners signaled that this was not however a reciprocal feature of the group work, and overall they were less positive about the Student/Practitioner mix of the groups than the Students.

There were issues of tension in some of the groups, not directly ascribed to the Practitioner/Student mix although this was not precluded as a cause, and suggestions made in regard to group numbers and members, to ease the tension. In spite of some of the problems inherent with the group work, most of the Students that commented indicated it was a good approach for them. Practitioners comments however did not reflect this sentiment as strongly.

Issues relating to the pitch of the content may have had something to do with Practitioners being less positive than Students about the group work. While 91% of Students Agreed or Strongly Agreed that the content was pitched at the right level, only 77% of Practitioners did so. As group activities comprised a significant portion of the course, it is not surprising that those that thought the content was too low, were also unanimous in wanting less group work and a more lecture style approach.

The majority of participants as indicated, thought that the content was pitched well however, and the teaching approach of theory and practice through the conceptual frameworks and practical exercises in groups, was appreciated. Practitioners commented about the theory and practice approach combined, whereas the Student comments generally did not make such explicit links between the practical and theoretical components.

Suggested Improvements

Making changes in the composition of groups was suggested. Some wanted the opportunity to interact with more people, whereas others wanted to work with different people. For example, one participant suggested '(p)erhaps the groups could have been rotated more often and size changed – it was in some cases easier to work on some of the activities in pairs or smaller groups.'

The other area to come under scrutiny for improvement in terms of the theory and practice aspects of the course was a desire to go into more depth or detail. Participants

agreed that they found value in the practical exercises and having an overview of the theory and concepts at the beginning of the course. Changing the structure of the course so that the theory was presented first rather than simultaneously was thought to be a solution to diffusing tensions and arguments.

Participants included specific examples of content they would have liked in the course. They included; more discussion of the New Zealand context; some information for students on how evaluation operates in 'real life work environments'; an exercise in setting out the questions of a scenario evaluation eg role-playing the negotiation phase; an exercise in commissioning evaluations and steps needed to ensure that the contracted evaluators stay focused and on the right track; and how to write evaluation reports. These suggestions of course, besides considerably lengthening the course indicate possible content for subsequent courses and highlight the need for ongoing professional development and training in the NZ context.

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