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Participatory Evaluation

An Alternative Strategy for Assessing the Process of Curricular Reform

This paper focuses on the use of participatory evaluation, a relatively new, flexible, interactive approach to assessment, and describes its implementation at two very different postsecondary sites. In particular, the paper addresses the importance of an institution's context in any assessment of curricular reform. Whether diversity was dominant or more marginal in the institution, participatory evaluation allowed it to become an integral part of the process. On both campuses, the voices of students and faculty, from diverse backgrounds, were heard and their suggestions were used. The implementation of participatory evaluation on an urban and a suburban site indicated the approach to be flexible and capable of evolving over time as the project required.

Curricular reform is an arduous process under the best of circumstances. When the goal of reform is a more balanced, pluralistic curriculum, however, the task becomes even more challenging and complex, in human as well as academic terms. Still another complicating factor, and one that has been too seldom acknowledged or acted upon, is context. Yet context *is* significant. This paper describes the evaluation of curricular reform projects at two colleges for the New Jersey Humanities Grant Program. The goals of both curricular reform projects sought to introduce multicultural perspectives into the college curriculum. Although both institutions are located in the same state, one is an urban institution with an extremely diverse student body, while the other is suburban and has a very homogeneous, predominantly white student population. The sites made for very different contexts for change. To evaluate these projects fairly, it seemed that standardized forms of assessment aimed at comparisons across sites would be unsuited and miss the point. Instead, what was needed was a flexible approach to assessment to determine the successes and failures of the individual projects on their own terms.

Participatory Evaluation as an Assessment Strategy

Theoretical Framework

For many years, programs and projects in higher education have been evaluated using traditional assessment techniques. An important aspect of traditional assessment is the requirement that, when a program is evaluated, it should be possible to compare results across sites. The psychometric paradigm lends itself well to this type of approach, enabling outside evaluators to use standardized instruments, collect comparable data, and generalize results.

Increasingly, however, assessors are reluctant to draw comparisons from site to site using standardized measures. Growing numbers of assessors are becoming aware of the importance of the **context** created on a particular campus and the difference it can make in the assessment process. Variables that may affect context abound. They include the makeup of the student population on a given site (i.e., its racial, gender, ethnic, and/or social class composition); the campus environment (i.e., rural, suburban, urban); and the gender, ethnic, and racial composition of the faculty. All of these, along with other factors, can influence predicted outcomes. Additionally, the philosophy and mission of the institution can make it different from other, seemingly comparable colleges or universities. Most important, such variables can have a marked effect on evaluation and may limit the validity or utility of generalizations across campuses.

Aware of the importance of the context in evaluating programs and projects, some assessors have strayed from standardized evaluative procedures and are searching for alternatives. A number of them have turned to a naturalistic paradigm involving participant observations, interviews, document analyses, and other, less standardized methods. Some assessors have gone so far as to break completely with their previous training, suggesting that psychometric and naturalistic traditions or paradigms are incompatible. Others, especially evaluators outside of the United States, view psychometrics and naturalistic evaluation as different paradigms rather than as separate traditions; they are not uncomfortable combining paradigms.

The naturalistic paradigm has been a vital component of the research and evaluative process in Europe for more than one hundred years. Since the time of Charles Darwin, research activities have emphasized phenomenological analysis. Today, not only in Europe but in the United States as well, researchers such as John Elliott, Michael Quinn Patton, Helen Simons, Louis Smith, and Rob Walker have written on diverse forms of naturalistic research and evaluation. Additionally, a number of assessors have bridged the gap between psychometric and naturalistic paradigms. One example of this type of work is illuminative evaluation, which spans both paradigms. Introduced by Malcolm Parlett, this form of assessment employs both quantitative and qualitative techniques and emphasizes the importance of "the problem" in determining the methods and approaches that should be utilized.

Illuminative evaluation is not concerned with comparisons across sites; the procedure is considered a success when the assessment results

are perceived to be credible to those who are part of the project. In other words, the context or site-specific nature of the assessment becomes a central issue in establishing validity.

The Development of Participatory Evaluation

While illuminative evaluation has much to recommend it, this form of assessment also has some limitations. One is the **subject/object split.** In an interactive situation, such as a Women's Studies project, the majority of participants wish to be perceived as more than the passive objects of a study. Joan Acker, Renate Duelli-Klein, Gill Kirkup, Ann Oakley, and many others have written about this interactive expectation. Those assessed often require that their voices be heard. In addition, a number of participants desire to play a part in the designing of assessment instruments or procedures. In fact, key individuals often want to play a role in the entire evaluative process from beginning to end.

Another salient issue, frequently ignored in illuminative evaluation, is the evaluator's role in the assessment process. Selection of an outside evaluator is usually related to knowledge of the subject matter, and frequently the evaluator has served as a leader in the specific field under review. Yet in much of the assessment literature, including illuminative evaluation, a guise of impartiality tends to obscure the **politics of evaluation** that frequently comes into play in the choice of the outside evaluator. Ernest House, Barry MacDonald, and others have had much to say on the topic of the politics of evaluation. They have indicated that in a highly interactive context, the evaluator's philosophical and educational leanings in support of, or against, a discipline or interdisciplinary field can influence the assessment process. A neutral outsider will not do; yet when the outside evaluator understands and supports the area, the assessor is perceived as a knowledgeable insider rather than a neutral outsider. As a knowledgeable insider, the assessor can instill trust in the participants and program directors—and the issue of trust is becoming increasingly important in evaluative studies. However, trust has not been discussed in the illuminative evaluation literature.

To surmount some of the limitations of illuminative evaluation, I have developed **participatory evaluation**. This form of assessment is an offshoot of illuminative evaluation and builds on the strengths of the model. However, the special contribution of this form of assessment is that it *includes* those being assessed in the evaluative process. This inclusion was of particular importance on a campus where there was little pluralism. On that site, this approach to assessment allowed diverse student and faculty voices to be heard, both as the curricular reform project unfolded and in the evaluation of that process. Thus, those evaluated play an active part in the assessment process from the beginning to the final report and beyond. The evaluator, in turn, is expected to interact with those whose project is being assessed. Problems presented by the subject/object split, the politics of evaluation, the tensions between knowledgeable insider and neutral outsider, and the issue of trust can be dealt with openly throughout the assessment process. In participatory evaluation, the focus is on the improvement of aspects of a program or project over time and less

on making a final judgment of the worth of the entire program or of comparing this program's value with others. It tends to be more of a process model of evaluation rather than a product one.

Participatory evaluation, like illuminative evaluation, is adaptable and combines both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Since there is no problem in crossing from psychometric to naturalistic paradigms, it is possible to choose from a wealth of assessment strategies. With its sensitivity to context, this form of assessment considers it important that the evaluator's report and recommendations are credible and of value to those who have been involved in the project, program, department, or institution being assessed.

The Two Case Studies

Participatory evaluation was used to assess projects at two very different institutions. One of the institutions is urban and serves students from many different racial and ethnic groups and social classes. The other is a suburban college with a predominantly white, middle-class population.

I began the assessment on each site by explaining to the program directors that I would use a participatory evaluation approach, and sent publications on this form of assessment to faculty in order to minimize preassessment anxiety. The papers indicated that the participants would not be expected to be the objects of the study; instead, they would be asked to play active roles. I also explained that I would serve as an evaluative consultant. My role would be to provide the project director and faculty with a varied "bag of tricks" of methods and approaches to carry out assessment, and to involve as many people as possible in the evaluative process. The faculty were free to determine what methods would be appropriate for answering the questions they might have about their particular project. I would make certain that varied perspectives or voices were heard, and offer my own perspective as an assessor. Moreover, after the evaluation was completed, I would serve as an advocate for the program, if needed, by presenting its accomplishments, along with areas of concern, to the university or college administration.

Case 1: A Diverse Urban Site

At the Camden campus of Rutgers University, the coeducational student body includes a range of racial and ethnic groups and social classes, and traditional- as well as nontraditional-aged students. This diversity carried over to the composition of the student and faculty group who participated in a project that developed a new interdisciplinary course on gender and multicultural studies. The course was designed by a cohort of eight faculty members and thirteen students during one spring semester after they and others in the university community attended a number of lectures. The new course would be "tested" out on regular undergraduate students, along with a group of five racially and ethnically mixed high school seniors from neighboring secondary schools. With the

latter group, the intention was that the course would serve as an introduction to college-level work. By the following spring, the course would be offered to a larger group of students within the university.

Distributing papers on participatory evaluation at the outset of the assessment process resulted in the development of considerable openness between the participants and myself. I helped to clarify project goals, provided an overview of diverse kinds of assessment methods, and frequently advised as to what I thought were the best methods for evaluating the project and its context. Often my suggestions were heeded. Throughout the project, I felt a more than satisfactory level of trust as I was afforded access to whatever data I wished, including students' journal entries as well as faculty statements. I was also invited to visit the campus frequently and, whenever I did visit, I felt very welcomed.

To assess the project, I relied on my own on-site observations of meetings and lectures, interviews with faculty, summary statements written by faculty, and student journal entries. My final report contained many different voices of both students and teachers by means of exact quotations. As I synthesized and began to interpret this wealth of information, patterns emerged. To make certain that these patterns were credible to those involved in the project, the final report was reviewed by the project director as well as by some faculty and students, and a few modifications were made.

I discovered that, as they developed the course, the eight faculty members learned from each other, from the interdisciplinary content areas, and especially from the diverse students who helped them design the course. Throughout the course development process, the faculty grew in their appreciation of students' varied backgrounds and learned to value their ideas. One faculty member discovered, seemingly against his own expectations, that students were capable of making significant contributions to the course. Another described the new respect she had developed for her nontraditional-aged students. Faculty members also learned from each other. One indicated that she had grown intellectually and as an educator in a number of important ways. Another seemed to have gained new respect for his colleagues and the complexity of their common task, while developing some healthy modesty about his own expertise. A third became more sensitive to others' "roots," more aware of her own—and less self-conscious about revealing them.

As for students' reactions to the course development, a number of journal entries indicated that special feelings of warmth and respect had developed as students helped professors. Like faculty, students became more aware and proud of their roots. Even traditional-aged white male students were affected by working on the course.

While there was much positive communication during the semester, sometimes open discussions caused difficulties. This tended to occur when the scholarship and the class discussion came too close to sensitive areas in a student's personal life or value system. For some students, the discussions raised topics that were taboo in their own culture. Fortunately, however, the journal enabled the voices of people from different cultures to be heard in a more private, less vulnerable format.

Through a variety of assessment techniques, some verbal and some written, the diverse faculty and students who created a gender and multicultural course together made their voices heard. It became clear through the assessment that students' voices and concerns did have an impact on the curriculum that would be used to teach future undergraduates at the university. Additionally, faculty learned from students, from colleagues, and from the new scholarship dealing with issues of gender, race, ethnicity, and social class. The people who created the curriculum became more knowledgeable of the content and more knowledgeable of each others' backgrounds and experiences.

Two years later, the goal of the original project had been achieved. The new interdisciplinary course focusing on gender and multicultural studies came into being as a core course in the university. The original eight faculty members rotated the team-teaching of the course each semester for both day and evening students. One of the initial faculty members created a revised course that is taught as a separate entity. One of the students who was involved in the project has facilitated several discussion groups that are part of the core course structure.

Despite the success of the interdisciplinary course, however, there have been some problems. One major difficulty has had to do with the sheer size of the classes. Because the course is part of the core requirements for undergraduates, the classes are very large. During the project itself, a number of faculty expressed concerns about the potential for large classes. Once implemented, it was the students and not the faculty who indicated their displeasure. Responding to the voices of the students, small discussion sections have been added.

Case 2: A Suburban, Predominately White Campus

Rider College is a small, coeducational liberal arts college located in a suburban setting. The undergraduate student population is predominately white. In September of 1988, the college was awarded a grant for a project, "to balance the curriculum and the campus environment at Rider College with respect to race, class, and gender," to be funded by the New Jersey Department of Higher Education and the college itself.

The project was to include four major components: a **public symposium series** with outside scholars on curriculum integration; development of an **interdisciplinary course** addressing the issues of race, class and gender; a **faculty development program** in which ten faculty members would design their own annotated bibliographies and then revise their current offerings; and a **focus group**, composed of eight African-American female students and four faculty and staff, to explore the experiences of being a minority female student on this predominately white campus.

Here, as at Camden, I made writings on participatory evaluation available to the project codirectors and the project team at the outset of the assessment process. By the time I arrived on campus, members of the project team seemed eager not only for advice on assessment but also for assistance on other aspects of the project. The faculty was already receptive to assessment, in part due to a positive experience with an earlier evaluator.

As the project progressed, I spoke frequently with one of the codirectors about ways to measure components of the project. It was clear to me that I was perceived as a knowledgeable insider as well as an external evaluator and consultant. A number of ideas for collecting additional data on the project were designed during these conversations and were soon implemented. I conducted several on-site visits and wrote an interim as well as a final report. In addition, after the completion of the project, I met with the coordinating team to review the year's activities, to offer observations and suggestions, and to discuss future plans. At a later date, Ann Law, one of the codirectors, and I presented a description of the evaluative process of the Rider project at an American Association of Higher Education (AAHE) Assessment Forum.

To assess the public symposium component of the project, we compiled attendance data and analyzed the results from a short questionnaire. The strengths and weaknesses of the interdisciplinary course development component were determined by reviewing the new course syllabus and the materials produced for the course and by interviewing faculty. Additionally, the institutionalization of the course as a college-wide requirement would be seen as an indicator of success. To assess the faculty development portion of the project, in which faculty members created new courses, we reviewed the before-and-after syllabi of the ten participating faculty members, their annotated bibliographies, the comments from individual and group interviews, and the number of faculty volunteers who wished to revise their courses in the future. Finally, the focus group's success or failure was judged by how successfully the students had affected changes in all the other components of the project and on the campus itself.

The focus group proved to be the catalyst that brought together all of the project participants at the end of the academic year.

The component of the Rider project I found most intriguing was the African-American female focus group. It was clear to those who designed the project that the voices of the female minority students must be heard. This was accomplished through a focus group, composed of eight black female students, two members of the coordinating team, and two campus administrators. They met biweekly for one academic year to share feelings and ideas and to learn together. From the outset, this focus group was deemed a key component of the project.

Initially, group members relied on responses to assigned readings, on consciousness-raising exercises, and on discussion of the classroom/campus climate. In the second semester, students began to act as participant observers in their own classrooms and report back to the group on the campus climate within their classrooms, with special attention to race and gender. In examining the group discussions, the codirector noted two problems: first, students appeared not to trust fully the faculty and administrators taking part in the sessions; second, there were not enough African-American adult role models on campus.

To redress the lack of role models, an African-American administrator was invited to join the focus group. The exercise of finding an appropriate person to assist the group made the white facilitators acutely aware of the

importance of role models for minority groups on the campus—and of the paucity of African-American administrators or faculty on the Rider campus.

In my interim report on the project, that I based in part on discussions with some of the African-American female students from the focus group, I wrote:

> "Trust was a very real issue...In particular, it was difficult for the black female students to indicate to the white female faculty and administrators the fact that race was a more important issue to them than gender...They wanted to get a better understanding of the whole project to see how their piece fit. In so doing, they thought there might have been less mistrust..."

I recommended that students be accorded a role in the entire faculty development project, not just in the focus group. In fact, the focus group proved to be the catalyst that brought together all of the project participants at the end of the academic year. Not only did various participants share their experiences when they met, but this activity helped the focus group students to see that their component was not an isolated enterprise and that their comments and criticisms had in fact contributed to the development of the curriculum and the assessment.

In follow-up interviews dealing with the outcomes of the project some three years later, I discovered that many of the goals had been addressed. The college institutionalized the position of a Race, Class, and Gender Project Director, and provides funds for an annual symposium series on the topic of diversity. The interdisciplinary course continues as well, team-taught as an option within the core curriculum. An outgrowth of the course is the completion of a book, entitled *Experiencing Race, Class, and Gender in the U.S.*, written by Virginia Cyrus, one of the codirectors of the project. The faculty development program also carries on, and ten additional faculty have volunteered each year to rewrite their syllabi taking into account the new scholarship on issues of difference.

The African-American female focus group has not endured formally. However, at least two of the young women who were members of the group have become student leaders on the Rider campus. As student leaders, they have shown a clear commitment to issues of both race and gender. Thanks, in part, to the focus group, there has been an increased awareness of the lack of minority role models at the college. This has resulted in increased hiring of African-American and Asian faculty. Additionally, although it cannot only be attributed to the project, there is now a new Multicultural Center on the campus, and April has been declared Diversity Month at Rider. Thus, on this campus, the impetus for positive change in the areas of race, class, and gender has continued unabated well after the end of the funding period.

Conclusion

At two very different colleges, participatory evaluation negated the subject/object split by asking all participants to play an interactive role from the beginning to the end of the project's funding, and even some

years beyond. Moreover, this approach took into account the politics of evaluation and allowed me to play the role of a knowledgeable insider more often than a neutral outsider. Above all, participatory evaluation allowed a framework of trust to be built and helped to infuse this quality into the entire assessment. It meant that project directors and the faculty were willing to share not only their accomplishments but, in some instances, their difficulties with the implementation process. In fact, they often sought my advice and accepted it, despite my role as an outside evaluator.

Participatory evaluation proved flexible and adaptable, allowing the selection of appropriate methods for a particular institution. The nature of the project and site-specific variables could be taken into account in determining the most suitable strategies. Whether diversity was dominant or more marginal in the institution, participatory evaluation allowed it to become an integral part of the process. On both campuses, the voices of students and faculty, from many different backgrounds, were heard and their suggestions were used. The implementation of participatory evaluation at two very different coeducational institutions indicated the method to be flexible and capable of evolving over time as the projects required.

Notes

1. Details relating to the two projects can be obtained from the author.
2. A description of the entire project, in general, and of the focus group, in particular, can be found in the following publications respectively:

   Carol Nicholson, Anne Law, Lise Vogel, Virginia Cyrus, and Mary Pinney. *Balancing the Curriculum and the Campus Environment at Rider College with Respect to Race, Class and Gender (1988-1989).* Lawrenceville, NJ: Rider College, July 1989.

   Anne L. Law. *Students' Role in Reconstructing the Curriculum.* Paper presented at the Eastern Psychological Association Meeting, 1989.

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Suggested Readings

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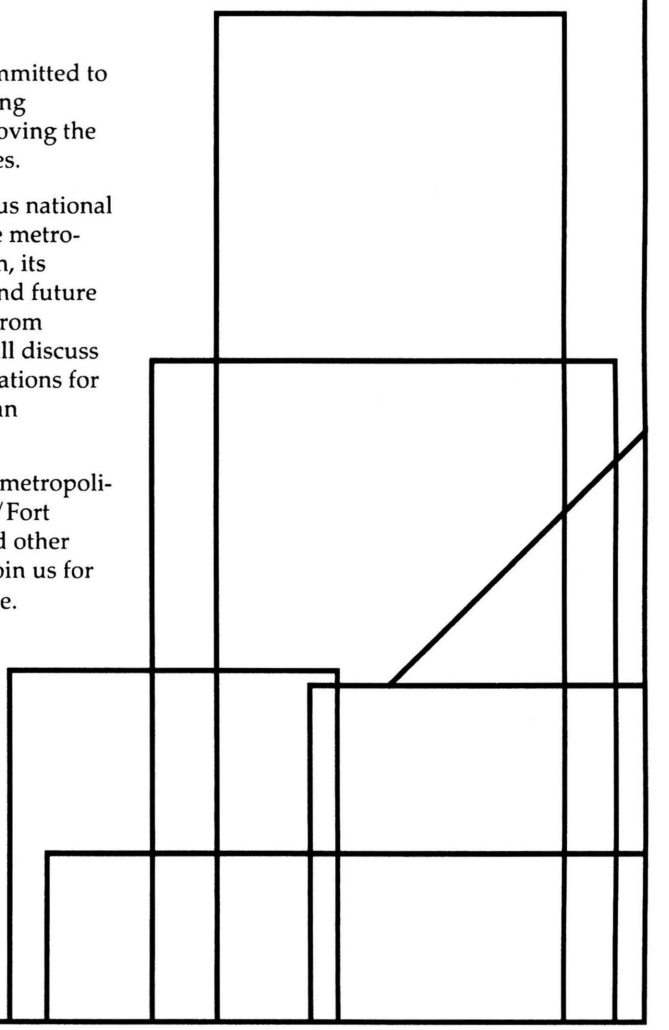

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