
The Program Evaluation Toolbox

Practical Strategies for Documenting Practice Change

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When a program participant makes a voluntary change in their behavior as a result of being involved with a planned learning experience, we can say that a practice change has occurred. According to the results hierarchy developed by Bennett and Rockwell (1995), documenting practice changes implemented by program participants is a powerful way to demonstrate the effectiveness of educational programs.

We know that immediately after the conclusion of an educational program we can assess whether or not a program participant gained knowledge as a result of the program. We can also measure their proficiency in performing a new skill. We may also see immediate changes in opinions or intentions. These are all prerequisites for the actual implementation of a new practice. But even though most of us can identify the practices that help us maintain our health, how many of us exercise as often as we should? Eat the right foods? Get yearly physical exams? Similarly, we can't assume that a program participant actually puts what they learned into practice.

So unlike assessing changes in knowledge, opinions, skills, or aspirations, measuring practice change requires some sort of systematic follow-up with participants to determine if recommended practices or behaviors are actually being performed. Listed below are some practical strategies for documenting practice change.

- # Many of the groups with which we work are on-going clubs or organizations that meet monthly or quarterly. This provides automatic access to the program participants at various points in the future. For example, if we conduct an educational program for a group or organization at a monthly meeting, we might visit the group again the following month to document whether or not members of the group have actually changed their behavior as a result of the program the month before.

- # When returning to an on-going club or organization to assess practice change, there are several possible strategies for gathering data. A simple way is to ask members to raise their hands if they have started doing the practices you read from a list.

Another way of gathering data about practice change is through the use of a brief questionnaire. Simply list the desired practices on a brief questionnaire and distribute the questionnaire to the members of the group. Here is one way of constructing a question designed to assess practice change by participants:

Please circle the number corresponding to the word or phrase which best describes how frequently you do each of the following practices.

	Never	Seldom	Usually	Always
Eat together as a family.	1	2	3	4

If you are concerned that a number of participants may have been performing a particular practice before participating in the program, administer the questionnaire at the beginning of the program as a pre-test, then use it again at the end of the program. Another option is to use two sets of responses on the post-test, one for participants to record how frequently they performed the practice before the program, and a second to record how frequently they perform the practice now.

When you do not have access to the group a second time you may choose to administer a mail questionnaire asking about their behaviors. However, make sure that you get participant names and addresses before leaving the workshop. At times, a follow-up telephone survey might be practical and appropriate.

There are times when actual observation of participants is possible. For example, on routine visits to clientele you may be able to observe that certain practices are being implemented. An agriculture agent may notice that a farmer has planted a variety of soybeans that was recommended at training school conducted months earlier. The key to effective observation is knowing what you are looking for and developing a procedure for recording what is seen. A notebook or checklist is often useful.

When you can't observe the participants yourself, you may wish to use individuals who have routine contact with the program participants as your observers. For example, to assess behavioral change in young people who have participated in a summer enrichment program, you may want to use their parents as observers of the child's behavior. You might provide parents with a brief checklist that asks questions like:

As a result of participating in the summer enrichment program...

has your child read additional books about the subject they studied?	YES	NO
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Another approach for documenting practice change is to use a key informant. For example, you may ask a classroom teacher to estimate the number of students in their class who have used any of the time management techniques taught during a workshop you conducted on coping with teen stress.