The Program Evaluation Toolbox

Using Non-Participant Observers
to Assess Program Impact

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Want to know if your program is making an impact? Next time try asking someone who isn't a part of the program!   Sure, it sounds rather odd.   But the impact of many programs can be assessed through the use of what evaluators call **non-participant observers**. Non-participant observers are individuals who are not directly involved with the administration or conduct of a particular program. But in many cases, they are in a better position than either the programmer or the participants to gauge the program's impact. Non-participant observers can include parents, teachers, managers, supervisors, counselors, community leaders, and a broad range of other individuals uniquely positioned to comment on the difference a program has made.

Perhaps the most common use of non-participant observers in educational settings has been to assess the quality of instruction occurring in a classroom. These uses of non-participant observation serve primarily formative purposes. In other words, they are used for the purpose of program improvement, rather than assessment of impact.   In this publication, we introduce the concept of using non-participant observers to assist you in making both quantitative and qualitative assessments of a program's impact.

There are advantages and disadvantages to using non-participant observers. An advantage is that non-participant observers can often provide more objective information than can program participants. They have less invested in the program and are less likely to overstate the program's impact. As a result, their assessment is often seen as more credible to external stakeholders. A disadvantage is that because that are not involved in the program, they may not always be in a position to know the impact that a program has had.   Consequently, it is important to give careful thought to what we ask non-participant observers to assess and who we identify to serve as non-participant observers.

Quantitative Assessments of Outcomes

Often the goal of our evaluation activities is to determine the number of people who have implemented a desired *practice* or *behavior*.   Or we want to know how frequently an individual performed a particular behavior.   When the goal of out evaluation activity is to count people or actions, we often use checklists, forms, or observation schedules to aid us in recording the desired information. We can also provide these tools to other individuals who are in a position to know the actions and behaviors of the participant(s) in question.   Let's look at some situations where these can be used.

Perhaps a county conducts an **after-school enrichment** program for school-aged children. The purpose of the program is to provide students with a safe after-school environment that provides them with experiential learning activities that stimulate interest in creative leisure-time activities. In such a case, parents of the program participants might be asked to serve as non-participant observers. A checklist provided to the parents may include the following item:

Example: Please place a checkmark next to each item that describes something
your child has done as a result of participating in the **after-school enrichment** program.

____ talked with you about something they learned
____ engaged in additional reading about a topic they studied
____ developed a new hobby or leisure-time activity

While the example above uses parents as non-participant observers, the impact of a classroom **character education program** might best be assessed through the use of teachers as non-participant observers. But, instead of reporting the behavior of only one child, they are asked to report on the behavior of all of the students in their classroom. Below is an example of such a question:

Example: Please circle the number corresponding to the phrase that best describes how the frequency with which students perform the following behaviors has changed as a result of participating in our recent program.

	Much Less	Slightly Less	No Change	Slightly More	Much More
Offering help to one another	1	2	3	4	5
Letting others have a turn	1	2	3	4	5
Name-calling	1	2	3	4	5

The example above asks the teacher to make an assessment of the class' behavior as a whole. There may be instances, however, where you would want to ask the observer to provide you with the actual number of individuals who have increased the frequency with which they perform a particular behavior as a result of participating in a program.

Sometimes, the program participants themselves identify the non-participant observers. For example, participants in an *agricultural or community leadership program* might be asked to provide the program leader with the name of a colleague, supervisor, or subordinate who could make an assessment of how the program has affected the participant. Here's an example of a question that might be asked of the non-participant observer.

Example: Please place a checkmark next to each area where you have observed considerable growth in the participant's skill level resulting from their participation in the recent leadership program.

____   Facilitating group process
____   Dealing with conflict
____   Working as a member of a team

There are also times when it may be appropriate to recruit and train a group of observers to look for particular indicators of a program's success.   Evaluators call these tangible indicators of program impact *program traces.* Program traces include such things as graffiti on walls, lawns mowed to the proper height, or the number of people frequenting a particular site.

For example, leaders of a *community beautification campaign* might want to examine the prevalence of roadside trash as an indicator of the program's success. A team of observers are assigned a one mile section of highway upon which they are to make litter counts on the tenth day of each month.   (The litter on the road is removed on the first day of the month by a clean-up team.) Each observer is provided with a checklist similar to the one below.

Example: Please make a pencil mark to the right of the appropriate item each time that item is observed on the section of roadside you are monitoring. Write the total number of that item observed in the space provided next to the right margin.

Glass beverage container	____
Fast food wrapper	____
Aluminum can	____

Qualitative Assessments of Outcomes

All of the examples above use structured, quantitative approaches for the collection of data from non-participant observers.   They each utilize checklists or forms upon which information is recorded.   Development of such instruments assumes that the programmer has a clear idea of the outcomes the program can logically produce, that what is observed is a good measure of the outcomes, and how those outcomes can be observed.

But there are also times when we have a general idea of the outcomes our programs are to produce, but we are not really sure how those outcomes will be able to be observed.   In such cases, it may be appropriate to use a more qualitative approach to data collection.   Qualitative approaches allow the observer more latitude in describing the changes they observe. Although they can also be highly structured and systematic, they are less likely to restrict the responses of the observers.

In some instances you may ask a non-participant observer to **actively** collect data about the impact of a particular program.   You may even provide them with an outline they can use for taking notes about what they observe.   Let's take a look at such a structured qualitative evaluation.

<u>Example:</u> You have recently conducted a ***program for agricultural producers*** who have chosen to sell products through a newly developed farmer's market. At that program you discuss such things as product quality, presentation of the product, and interaction with customers. You enlist three non-participant observers to visit the farmer's market and record their observations. They visit the farmer's market on two occasions before the program is conducted and on two additional occasions after the producers have completed the program. Each observer is asked to respond to a set of open-ended questions targeting the key content areas addressed by the program. Some of these might include:

Describe in your own words how the produce was presented to you as a consumer. Was it presented in such a way that would make you want to purchase the product?

Describe your interaction with the individuals selling products at the farmer's market. Was it cordial and friendly? Cold and impersonal?   What was the atmosphere like?

There may be other instances where you identify several non-participant observers who you ask to make comments on their ***passive observations*** about the impact of a program. Such observers do not actively gather information about the impact of the program. They make comments based on the information they currently have. Here's an example of an unstructured qualitative assessment.

<u>Example:</u> For the past semester you have been providing leadership to a student organization at a local high school which focuses on ***building unity among students*** through valuing all forms of human difference. You want to know what type of impact the program has had on the school community. You select three teachers, a guidance counselor, and the school principal to serve as non-participant observers.   In a telephone interview you ask them to give you their assessment of the changes that they have observed in the school's community since the new student organization was formed.

References

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