

**Using Reflection as Strategies for Student Assessment and
Program Evaluation**

By

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Contextual Factors That Influenced the Organization and Training of Emerging Evaluators:

Factors Related to Professional Practice Nationwide:

- The current practice climate (i.e., political and fiscal) is placing emphasis, sometimes unwarranted emphasis, on science-based programs in the prevention field, in education, and in most arenas of human service delivery and disregarding other forms of evidence as subordinate or superfluous.
- Multi-level collaboration for local, state and national evaluation is required but little attention is paid to preparation in collaborative approaches.
- Evaluation competencies have been defined and endorsed by the American Evaluation Association that go beyond systematic inquiry knowledge and skills (research methods, quantitative and qualitative inquiry, etc.) to include attitudes and orientations that challenge traditional training programs.

Contextual Factors That Influenced the Organization and Training of Emerging Evaluators:

Factors Related to Professional Practice in Nevada:

- The Nevada Evaluation Association was recently formed to provide a professional network for practicing evaluators (2003) and offer professional development opportunities.
- Nevada has no clearly defined career pathway (education, training, and field experience) for those seeking to become professional evaluators.
- The demand for evaluation continues to increase, yet the majority of funding for evaluation is contracted to individuals and companies outside the state.

Reflection Strategies are Typically used as an Instructional Strategy: Other Uses include Student Assessment and Program Development and Evaluation

Action Reflection Theories of Dewey and Kolb:

Individual action and engagement, combined with reflective thinking develops a greater understanding of the content being studied.

The Conference format was designed to provide a service to the professional evaluation community and create opportunities for public exposure and exploration of existing professional dilemmas.

Reflection Strategies are Typically used as an Instructional Strategy: Other Uses include Student Assessment and Program Development and Evaluation

- **Effective Strategies for Fostering Reflection are Based on Four Core Elements:**
 - *Continuous*- The reflective process is implemented and maintained continuously before, during and after the service-learning experience.
 - *Connected*- The service experience is directly linked, or connected to the learning objectives of the course or activity and allows for “synthesizing action and thought.”
 - *Challenging*- Learners are challenged to move from surface learning to deeper, critical thinking through the use of thought provoking strategies by the instructor or community facilitator. Since learners may encounter uncomfortable feelings, it is important that students feel they are in a safe and mutually respectful atmosphere where they can freely express their opinions, ideas, and thoughts.
 - *Contextualized*- Reflection is contextualized when it “corresponds” to the course content, topics and experience in a meaningful way.

Components of the Training Opportunity for Emerging Evaluators: Structured Reflection Opportunities that were used to Assess Student Development and Evaluate the Conference Format/Experience:

Day 1:

- Pre-Reflection Activities:
 - *Survey* on Perceptions of Confidence, Competence and Frequency of Use along the Six Domains of Evaluation Competencies
 - *Oral Group Reflection* to Prompts
- Conference: Experiential/Service-Related Experience
 - 11:00-5:00 p.m.
 - Group Panel discussing the question, what constitutes evidence in evaluation?
 - Four workshops presenting differing aspects of the context and evaluation approaches in the prevention field from a local, state, and national perspective
- Reading and Writing Response*: Thomas Schwandt's article: "The centrality of practice to evaluation"

Components of the Training Opportunity for Emerging Evaluators: Structured Reflection Opportunities that were used to Assess Student Development and Evaluate the Conference Format/Experience:

Day 2:

- *Oral Group Reflection on:*
 - Reading/Response to Conference themes
 - Perceptions of Competencies Important to Evaluation (*reinforcing survey data*)
 - Perceptions of Challenges and Strengths in Competency Domains (*reinforcing survey data*)
- *Case Method Analysis: Small Group work and Presentation*
- *Delta/Plus Assessment of Conference/Seminar Format*
- *Post-Reflection Activities:*
 - *Survey on Perceptions of Confidence, Competence and Frequency of Use along the Six Domains of Evaluation Competencies*
 - *Written Reflection to Five Prompts*
 - *Individual Interview with Instructor*

Taxonomy of Essential Competencies for Program Evaluators: Targeted Areas for Student Development and Assessment*

- **Project Management:**
 - Responds to requests for proposals;
 - negotiates; writes formal agreements;
 - budgets; supervises and trains others involved;
 - conducts evaluation in a non-disruptive manner;
 - presents work in a timely manner

Taxonomy of Essential Competencies for Program Evaluators: Targeted Areas for Student Development and Assessment*

- **Professional Practice:***
 - Ability to apply professional standards;
 - acting ethically;
 - respecting clients, stakeholders, and program participants;
 - contributing to knowledge base of evaluation

Taxonomy of Essential Competencies for Program Evaluators: Targeted Areas for Student Development and Assessment*

- **Systematic Inquiry:**
 - Understands knowledge base of evaluation;
 - Quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods;
 - develops evaluation designs; analyzes and interprets data;
 - makes judgments and recommendations;
 - reporting;
 - conducts meta-evaluation

Taxonomy of Essential Competencies for Program Evaluators: Targeted Areas for Student Development and Assessment*

- **Situational Analysis:***
 - Determines program evaluability;
 - identifies relevant key stakeholders;
 - examines organizational context;
 - analyzes political considerations;
 - attends to issues of evaluation use;
 - respects uniqueness of site and clients;
 - modifies study as needed

Taxonomy of Essential Competencies for Program Evaluators: Targeted Areas for Student Development and Assessment*

- **Reflective Practice:***
 - Aware of self as evaluator;
 - reflects on personal evaluation practice;
 - pursues professional development in evaluation and relevant content areas;
 - builds professional relationships to enhance evaluation practice

Taxonomy of Essential Competencies for Program Evaluators: Targeted Areas for Student Development and Assessment*

- **Interpersonal Competence:***
 - Uses written and verbal/listening communication skills;
 - uses negotiation and conflict resolution skills;
 - facilitates constructive interpersonal interaction;
 - demonstrates cross-cultural competence

Which Competencies are students coming into the program already understanding and experiencing?

Which can be most directly influenced by an experiential approach?

Framing Questions That Guided the Reflection Formats for Emerging Evaluators and the Use of Data for Student Assessment and Program Evaluation

- What knowledge, skills and dispositions do they consider important in conducting evaluations?
- What competencies do they perceive as their strengths? As their challenges?
- How are these beliefs, competencies, and understandings influenced by the training format?

Framing Questions That Guided the Reflection Formats for Emerging Evaluators and the Use of Data for Student Assessment and Program Evaluation

How broadly do emerging evaluators conceive of evaluation?

What is their understanding of evaluation as a profession with its own approaches, methods, and purposes?

To what extent do they differentiate between research and evaluation?

What benefit do they perceive in the training format that combined a half-day conference with a day of structured reflection?

Table 1.0 Comparison of Mean Scores in Overall Ratings of Confidence, Competence and Frequency of Use Among Emerging/Student (N=5) and Practicing Evaluators (N=16)

Evaluation Competency Domain	Overall Confidence		Overall Competence		Overall Frequency of Use	
	Emerging	Practicing	Emerging	Practicing	Emerging	Practicing
Professional Practice	2.80	3.31	2.80	3.00	3.40	3.43
Systematic Inquiry	2.20	3.60	2.20	3.77	3.20	3.71
Situational Analysis	3.20	3.21	3.20	3.21	3.20	3.24
Project Management	<i>3.40</i>	<i>3.73</i>	2.25	3.54	<i>3.40</i>	<i>3.92</i>
Reflective Practice	3.00	3.57	2.80	3.57	2.20	3.57
Interpersonal Competence	4.20	3.79	4.40	3.71	4.60	4.21

Bold=Highest rated domain

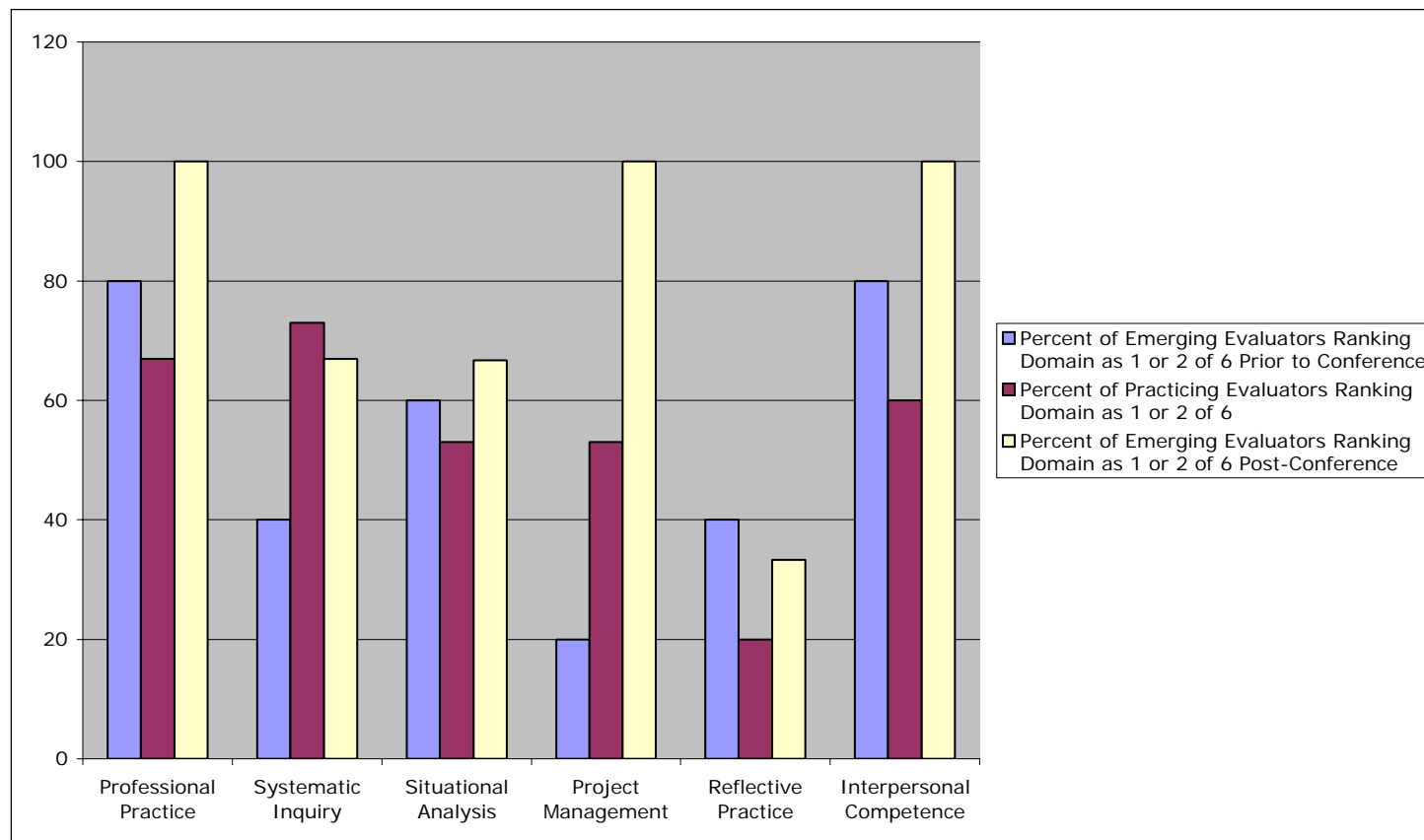
Italics=Second highest rated domain

OBSERVATIONS

- Emerging evaluators perceive “Interpersonal Competence” as their greatest strength and this one domain is consistent for perceptions of confidence, competence, and frequency of use.
- Practicing evaluators perceive “Systematic Inquiry” as the domain in which they are most competent; “Interpersonal Competence” is their second highest domain of perceived competence.
- “Situational Analysis” is the competency domain in which emerging and practicing evaluators show the greatest similarity.
- There is a strong correlation among perceived confidence, competence, and frequency of use for practicing evaluators except in the domain of Interpersonal Competence, where they perceive levels of use at a higher level than actual competence.
- Emerging evaluators seem to perceive that the demand for use of various competencies is there, but do not perceive their competence levels as matching use levels. The exception to this trend is in the area of “Reflective Practice” in which they see their confidence and competence as higher than use.

What knowledge, skills and dispositions do they consider important in conducting evaluations?

Figure 1. Comparison of Perceived Importance Ratings Among Emerging and Practicing Evaluators on Pre-Conference Survey and Emerging Evaluators on Post-Conference Survey

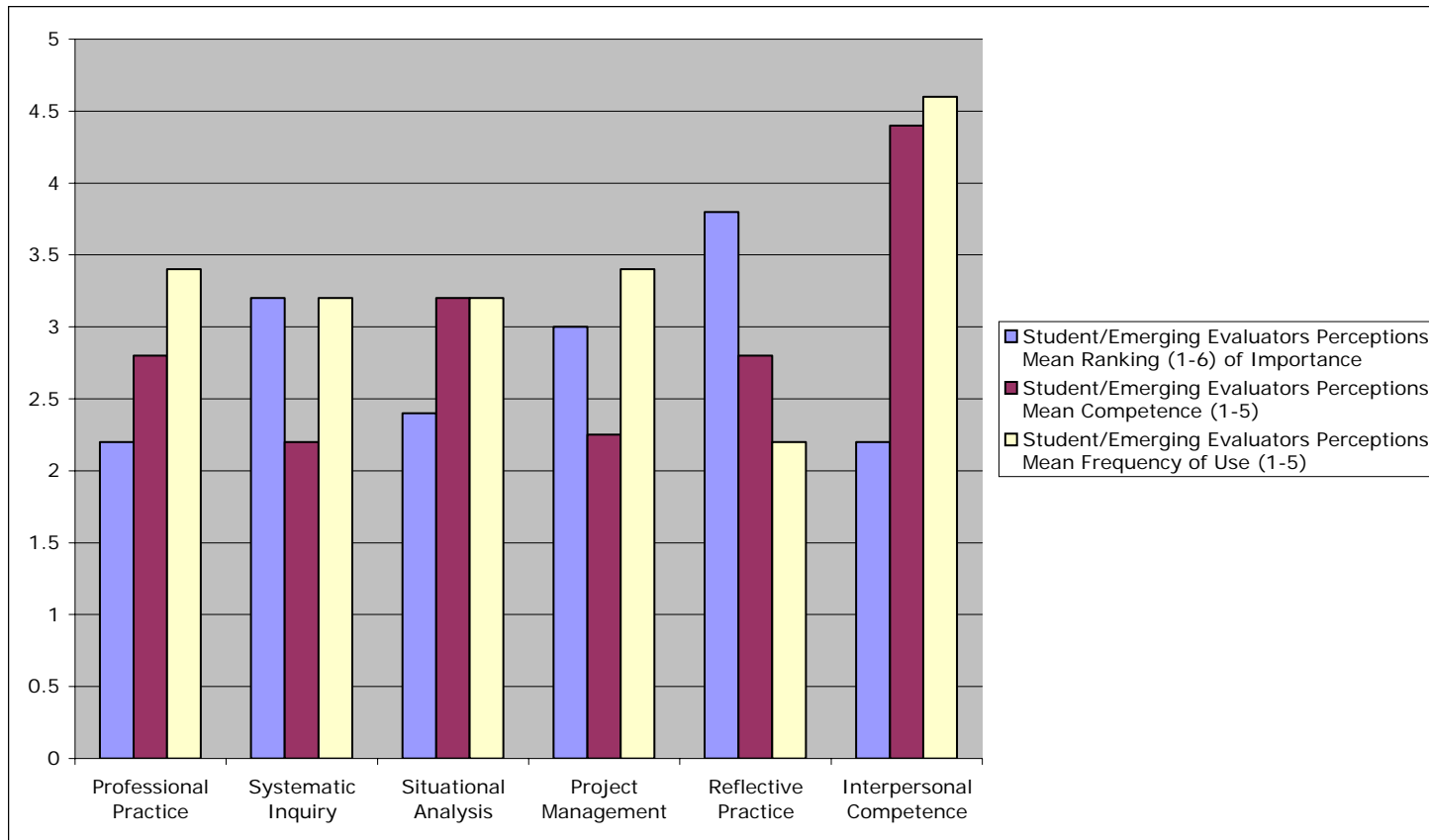


OBSERVATIONS

- Emerging evaluators increased their perceptions of the importance of “Professional Practice,” “Project Management,” and “Interpersonal Competence.
- Emerging and Practicing Evaluators had substantial differences in their perceptions of the importance of “Systematic Inquiry” and “Project Management” competencies, the focus of “Science-based” programs and evaluations when they entered the conference.
- Perceptions of the importance of these two competency domains were significantly altered for emerging evaluators from pre to post-conference reflections and survey.
- “Reflective Practice” was perceived slightly higher in importance by emerging evaluators than “Project Management,” but by the end of the two-day seminar, it was perceived as the least important of the six domains in conducting evaluations.

What competencies do they perceive as their strengths? As their challenges?

Figure 2: Emerging Evaluators' Perceptions of Importance, Competence, and Frequency of Use of the Six Competency Domains for Evaluators



OBSERVATIONS

- There is a strong correlation between perceived importance, competence and frequency of use for emerging evaluators' "Interpersonal Competence" and "Professional Practice" competencies.
- "Reflective Practice" is perceived as the least important competency domain; although emerging evaluators tend to perceive themselves as fairly competent in these skills, they do not perceive a demand for using them in evaluation.
- "Systematic Inquiry" and "Project Management" are two competency domains that demonstrate a mismatch for emerging evaluators in terms of their perceived levels of competence and their perceptions of the importance and demand for use of these skills.

Using Reflection Data for Student Assessment: How broadly do emerging evaluators conceive of evaluation?

- Perception shift among emerging evaluators regarding which competencies were central to program evaluation toward less disparity between and among the six domains of competence.
- 100% perceived Interpersonal Competence, Project Management and Professional Practice as equally important to Program evaluation.
- Two thirds ranked Systematic Inquiry and Situational Analysis as 1st or 2nd.
- Conceptually students grasped that evaluation is complex, both a science and art, and is relationship-based.

Using Reflection Data for Student Assessment: How broadly do emerging evaluators conceive of evaluation?

- Emerging evaluators are challenged to conceive of the evaluation process as not specifically outcome-driven or adhering to science-based, research paradigm.
- Pre-conference responses indicated a surface understanding of contextual factors that would influence program evaluation.
- During post-reflection activities, students presented a more confused and confounded grasp of their own knowledge and understanding, relating it to exposure to the language of evaluation and a lack of exposure to variations in evaluation approaches and practice.

Beyond reflection and in-class/conference exposures, students repeatedly indicated that experience or practice (i.e., exposure to evaluators in the field) were salient factors in becoming competent evaluators.

Themes that Emerged in Students' Reflections:

Design Drift:

Students are challenged to entertain alternative paradigms- positivistic **and** holistic or naturalistic—and return to their basic research training when they are asked to articulate what's important in evaluation.

Themes that Emerged in Students' Reflections:

Hands-On Helps the Heads-Up:

Field-based experiences as prevention providers, educators, health workers provide preparation in specific evaluation competencies often lacking in more experienced evaluators: interpersonal competence; situational analysis.

Themes that Emerged in Students' Reflections:

Evaluation is Relationship-Centered:

Evaluation involves an “honest” and “unbiased” exchange of information—input and feedback--with respect for the clients' views; it must be grounded in clients' priorities. Interpersonal competence is considered most important of the six domains.

Themes that Emerged in Students' Reflections:

Method Mix-Up vs. Mixed Methods

Research is often associated with
quantitative and evaluation with
qualitative methods.

Themes that Emerged in Students' Reflections:

What is this thing called evaluation?

Students express the need for a solid orientation to the field of evaluation—its purposes, approaches and applications--if they are to develop a comprehensive understanding of what the profession involves. Beginning with research methods and design may erroneously set the stage for misconceptions that are hard to correct.

What is their understanding of evaluation as a profession with its own approaches, methods, and purposes?

Evaluation as Distinct from Research:

- Students perceive evaluation as distinct from research in that evaluation as a profession and practice looks at the entire system and process:
- “Evaluation can look at the whole system whereas research can be more focused on just one piece of system.”
- “Evaluation is better served by looking at the whole process rather than what happens at the end.”

What is their understanding of evaluation as a profession with its own approaches, methods, and purposes?

Design Drift

- As students find themselves sorting through the complexities of program evaluation (language, contextual considerations, etc.) there is a tendency to migrate back to the familiar and their foundational knowledge in the scientific method.

What is their understanding of evaluation as a profession with its own approaches, methods, and purposes?

Methods Mix-Up Vs. Mixed Methods:

- Erroneously, students often equate quantitative methods with research and qualitative methods with evaluation.
- “I think of research a lot of the time as being more quantitative.”
- “Evaluation looks more at things that have occurred and can be measured...It’s a little more compartmentalized.”

Result: Contradictions in conceptions of practice and capacity to apply those conceptions in articulating the how to's of the profession.

Using Reflection Data for Program Evaluation: How are these beliefs, competencies, and understandings influenced by the training format?

- Students view training in evaluation as the blending of research or “science” and practice or “art” because it combines knowledge, application, observation and experience.
- “Reflective Practice” was rated lowest in terms of demand and importance, but in oral reflections it played heavily in terms of training and experience:
 - ○ “being aware of who you are and knowing what others do that is different from you.”
 - ○ “if you don’t know what type of person you are you may take on cases that don’t fit your strengths.”
- Some saw reflective practice and situational analysis as two sides of the same coin—one internally focused and the other externally focused.

Using Reflection Data for Program Evaluation: How are these beliefs, competencies, and understandings influenced by the training format?

- Based on reflections on what they were learning about evaluation, students identified four of the six competency domains as strength areas they could bring into their development as evaluators: 1) Professional Practice; 2) Situational Analysis; 3) Reflective Practice; and 4) Interpersonal Competence.
- Systematic Inquiry and Project Management competencies continued to be perceived as low competency areas.
- Deeper understanding that the evaluation field represents a variety of approaches, orientations, theories and philosophies:
- “ there is not necessarily one “right way” to do evaluation, but the evaluator must be the “right fit” for the organization.”

What benefit do they perceive in the training format that combined a half-day conference with a day of structured reflection?

- Students reiterated the importance of reflection to the process of competency development in terms of:
 - “Pre-reflection laid the foundation for conference presenters and provided something to focus on.”
 - “so many different views—it will take weeks to process.”
 - “Moving through today’s [reflection activities] things came to mind [from yesterday’s conference] as ‘AHAs!’”
 - “Need more time to listen to comments [and not] cut out dialogue [during conference.]”
 - “When you’re coming into the field it’s most helpful to listen to comments—it breaks it down to lay/common language.”

What benefit do they perceive in the training format that combined a half-day conference with a day of structured reflection?

- Dialogue, as a form of reflection, was most often emphasized by students as a helpful form of processing and learning.
- The multiplicity of views and information provided the means for considering the comprehensiveness of evaluation as a profession.

General Conclusion:

- First introductions to the field are assisted by ongoing reflections and dialogue, but not sufficient for insuring integration and development of the full spectrum of competencies central to evaluation.
- Application and practice through observation of other evaluators in the field, structured experiences combined with opportunities for reflection are necessary to insure breadth and depth of conceptual and procedural knowledge.

Implications for Program Development and Improvement for Instructional and Training Formats for Emerging Evaluators:

- **Consider sequencing of courses so that research methods does not set the dominant tone for students' perceptions of what constitutes evaluation practice.**
- **Integrate experiential learning with classroom learning as early as possible into coursework.**
- **Utilize community-based instructional opportunities for competencies that are less likely to form a core course (negotiation skills; budget development, etc.) in evaluation preparation.**

Implications for Program Development and Improvement for Instructional and Training Formats for Emerging Evaluators:

- **Be very intentional and explicit when using language inherent to the profession, making links to prior discipline-based learning and semantics whenever possible.**
- **Insure that all course curricula designed to orient students to evaluation consistently reference the AEA Guiding Principles, Joint Standards of Practice and six competency domains to reinforce the breadth of the profession and distinguish it from research.**
- **Continue to utilize case study approaches in lieu of or to reinforce experiential learning in evaluation.**
- **Continue to utilize reflection as an instructional strategy to link learning to experience and reinforce “reflective practice competencies.”**