

similarities of extension and evaluation

Michael Quinn Patton

Extension and evaluation both center on getting useful information to people. Extension provides information aimed at such things as improving farm productivity, improving nutrition, and improving the quality of life in the home, community, or business. Evaluation provides information aimed at improving programs, improving the effectiveness of personnel, and assuring accountability.)

This article emphasizes the things that effective Extension education and useful evaluations have in common. Indeed, I shall argue that effective Extension and effective evaluation involve *identical* principles and processes.

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If this assumption is true, evaluation shouldn't be viewed by Extension staff as something alien, threatening, or unknown. Evaluation can be viewed as a specialized application of more general Extension principles and methods because both Extension and evaluation involve making research knowledge understandable, packaging information for decision making, educating information users, and encouraging people to act on the basis of knowledge.)

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Shared Processes

The basic processes of effective Extension work are derived from the diffusion of innovations and change-agent literatures.¹ The processes of evaluation, as shown in Table 1, are derived from recent research on ways of increasing the effectiveness and use of evaluation.²

The first step in these parallel processes is identifying the people who are to benefit and be served by an Extension program or an evaluation. Extension staff can't serve everyone. Some targeting is necessary. Likewise, evaluations must be targeted. No single evaluation can answer everyone's questions. Effective Extension programs and effective evaluations are carefully targeted.

Step 2 emphasizes the importance of needs assessment in both Extension program development and evaluation design. Needs assessment includes finding out from clients and decision makers what's worth doing. Many rigorously designed evaluations go unused because evaluators failed to find out what program staff and decision makers really needed and wanted to know. Both effective Extension and effective evaluation include attention to the *real* information needs of targeted groups.

Step 3 emphasizes that the information disseminated by both Extension staff and evaluators is based on research. Extension information comes from experiment station research, university faculty studies, and private sector research and development work. Evaluation information comes from studies of program processes, outcomes, and consequences. Regardless of the type of study conducted, the source of information, or the rigor of methods used, *both* Extension and evaluation are research-based. Both try

Table 1. Parallel processes in Extension and evaluation.

<u>Basic Extension processes</u>	<u>Basic evaluation processes</u>
<i>Step 1:</i> Determine who's to be served by an Extension program. Who are the clients or targets of a program?	<i>Step 1:</i> Determine whose information needs are to be met by an evaluation. Who are the decision makers and information users for the evaluation?
<i>Step 2:</i> Determine the information and program needs of the clients.	<i>Step 2:</i> Determine the evaluation information needs of decision makers and information users.
<i>Step 3:</i> Gather the needed information and develop the needed program.	<i>Step 3:</i> Gather the needed information.
<i>Step 4:</i> Deliver information and recommendations to clients.	<i>Step 4:</i> Present evaluation findings to decision makers and information users.
<i>Step 5:</i> Work with clients to apply and use what they've learned.	<i>Step 5:</i> Work with decision makers to apply and use evaluation findings.

to provide valid information for decision making and change for decision making.

Step 4 focuses on the information delivery process. It's not enough for researchers and evaluators to generate new knowledge. Research and evaluation information must be *extended*. No idea is more fundamental to Extension than the idea that research knowledge must be translated, packaged, made understandable, made practical, and adapted to local situations. Likewise, evaluation findings must be translated, simplified, and made understandable to targeted decision makers and information users.

Finally, Step 5 calls attention to the importance of follow-up. It's not enough to just deliver information to people. To bring about real change in behaviors and practices, it's usually necessary to work with people over time to help them apply and use information they've been given. An effective evaluation process isn't completed when the report is written and the findings officially delivered. The evaluation utilization process involves personal follow-up, clarification, discussion, and work with decision makers to help them use and apply evaluation findings.

From Shared Processes to Shared Principles

Principles and standards are guiding ideas. They make explicit our ideals and provide a guide to practice. Principles and standards tell us what's important, to what we should pay attention, and how we should act. While I'm unaware of any single statement of Extension principles about which there's widespread consensus, a recent statement of evaluation standards that set forth the principles of professional evaluation practice exists.³

What's important about the new evaluation standards is both their applicability to Extension evaluations and their striking similarity to what I perceive are basic Extension principles. By being aware of the new evaluation standards, Extension staff can approach evaluations with a better sense of how effective evaluations ought to be done.

Four Themes

The evaluation standards are organized around four themes: utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy. The *utility standards* call for clear identification of audiences, writing clear and understandable reports, getting evaluations done on time, stating evaluator qualifications and biases, and taking responsibility for how an evaluation is used.

The *feasibility standards* mandate that an evaluation should be realistic, prudent, diplomatic, and frugal. The *propriety standards* state that an evaluation should be conducted legally, ethically, and with due regard for the welfare of those involved in and affected by an evaluation. Finally, the *accuracy standards* deal with the technical adequacy of

evaluative information: validity, reliability, data control, drawing conclusions, and objectivity.⁴

Direct Relevancy

The new standards are directly relevant to Extension evaluations. These standards provide a clear basis for judging evaluations in ways that go beyond the traditional criteria of methodological rigor. In the past, an evaluation was considered “good” if measuring instruments were carefully constructed, if samples were randomly drawn, if there was a control group, and if results were statistically analyzed.

Yet, evaluations of high methodological quality are often ignored because they focus on the wrong issues, ignore the real information needs of decision makers, or are presented in ways that confuse, alienate, or mystify the very people who most need to understand and use them. Under the new standards, evaluations must still be valid and accurate, but they must also be useful, understandable, relevant, and practical.

Extension Principles and Evaluation Standards

An earlier section discussed similarities between Extension programming and the conduct of evaluations. This section extends that discussion by examining the similarities between the evaluation standards and some basic Extension principles.

Utility

The new standards mandate that evaluations should, above all, be useful. Attention to utilization potential is the highest priority in evaluation. Likewise, one can argue that utility should be the guiding principle in Extension programming. Giving priority to the utility criterion means asking and answering such questions as: What’s really worth doing? What can we do that will truly make a difference? What can we do or present that’s genuinely useful?

These questions are as applicable to Extension program development as they are to evaluation design. Moreover, these questions make explicit the linkage between evaluation and ongoing program development in that evaluation is the way to find out what participants in Extension programs actually use and apply as a result of their Extension experiences.

Feasibility

The second of the four evaluation standards—feasibility—is also applicable to Extension. The feasibility standard mandates that evaluations be practical, politically sensitive, and cost-effective. Effective Extension programs

should also be practical in content, sensitive to politically volatile issues, and cost-effective.

Propriety

The third evaluation standard concerns propriety. This standard mandates that evaluators should show respect for the people from whom they gather data. Evaluators should be fair and ethical. Likewise, Extension staff effectiveness may depend to a large extent on how the community perceives such agent qualities as respect for people in the community, fairness in dealing with people, and attention to ethical concerns. "Good" evaluators and "good" Extension agents are called on to exhibit many of the same personal qualities.

Accuracy

Finally, under the accuracy umbrella, the standards address the more traditional technical concerns of validity, reliability, and methodological rigor. Evaluations aren't worth using unless the information generated is trustworthy and as accurate as possible given inevitable constraints of limited resources, time, and knowledge. But the same is true of Extension efforts. Extension staff must go to great lengths to be sure that information disseminated is trustworthy and accurate.

As a Peace Corps Extension agent in Africa, I experienced substantial resistance in 1 village where advice given to the farmers 20 years earlier had turned out to be counterproductive and led to a poor harvest and food shortages. As an evaluator, I've experienced substantial resistance from program staff who have been "burned" by following the advice of evaluators who lacked a real database for their recommendations. Accuracy is an important standard in both Extension and evaluation.

Table 2 presents a number of specific examples of the correspondence and interplay between evaluation standards and what might be considered basic principles of Extension practice. Because both evaluation and Extension involve the gathering, processing, dissemination, and use of information, it's perhaps not surprising that they share core principles and standards.

Conclusion

The process of making evaluation findings useful involves basic Extension processes. The thrust of the new evaluation standards is that professional evaluators have a responsibility to *extend* their findings. I'm hopeful that the new evaluation standards can be readily understood and used by Extension staffs in part because the standards seem to me to be virtually identical to fundamental principles of effective Extension practice.

Table 2. Parallel evaluation and Extension principles.

<u>Utility Criterion Examples</u>	
<u>Evaluation standard</u>	<u>Extension principle</u>
1. <i>Targeting evaluation:</i> Evaluations should be designed to meet the information needs of specifically targeted audiences.	1. <i>Targeting Extension programs:</i> Programs should be developed to meet the identified needs of specifically targeted audiences.
2. <i>Evaluator credibility:</i> The people conducting an evaluation should be both trustworthy and competent to achieve credibility and acceptance.	2. <i>Extension staff credibility:</i> The people conducting programs should be both trustworthy and competent to achieve credibility and acceptance.
3. <i>Information scope:</i> Information collected should address pertinent questions and be responsive to the needs and interests of specified audiences.	3. <i>Information scope:</i> Information provided should address pertinent questions and be responsive to the needs and interests of participants in programs.
4. <i>Report clarity:</i> Evaluation reports should be readily understandable with clear recommendations, where appropriate.	4. <i>Report clarity:</i> Extension materials should be readily understandable with clear recommendations, where appropriate.
5. <i>Follow-through:</i> Evaluation should be planned and conducted in ways that encourage follow-through by members of the audiences.	5. <i>Follow-through:</i> Extension programs should be planned and conducted in ways that encourage follow-through by participants.

Feasibility Criterion Examples

1. <i>Practical procedures:</i> Evaluation procedures should be selected with attention to known time constraints and participants' availability.	1. <i>Practical considerations:</i> Extension programs should be planned with attention to participants' availability and time constraints.
2. <i>Political viability:</i> The evaluation should be planned and conducted with anticipation of different positions of various interest groups, so that their cooperation may be obtained, and so that	2. <i>Political viability:</i> Extension programs should be planned and conducted with anticipation of the different positions of various interest groups, so that their cooperation may be obtained,

possible attempts by any of these groups to curtail evaluation operations or to bias or misapply the results can be averted or counteracted.

3. *Cost effectiveness:*
Evaluations should produce information of sufficient value to justify the resources expended.

and so that controversies can be anticipated and misunderstandings averted.

3. *Cost effectiveness:*
Extension programs should be of sufficient value to justify the resources expended.

Propriety Criterion Examples

1. *Human interactions:*
Evaluators should respect human dignity and worth in their interactions with other people associated with an evaluation.

2. *Balanced reporting:*
The evaluation should be complete and fair in its presentation of strengths and weaknesses of the object under investigation, so that strengths can be built on and problem areas addressed.

3. *Fiscal responsibility:*
The evaluator's allocation and expenditure of resources should reflect sound accountability procedures and otherwise be prudent and ethically responsible.

1. *Human interactions:*
Extension staff should respect human dignity and worth in their interactions with clients and others involved in Extension.

2. *Balanced presentations:*
Extension information and programs should be complete and fair in presenting both sides of issues and problems under discussion, and both strengths and weaknesses of proposed innovations or changed practices should be discussed.

3. *Fiscal responsibility:*
The Extension agent's allocation and expenditure of resources should reflect sound accountability procedures and otherwise be prudent and ethically responsible.

Accuracy Criterion Examples

1. *Defensible information sources:*
The sources of information in an evaluation should be described in enough detail that the adequacy of the information can be assessed.

2. *Justified conclusions:*
The conclusions reached in an evaluation should be explicitly justified, so that the audiences can assess them.

1. *Defensible information sources:*
The sources of information drawn on for Extension presentations and programs should be described in enough detail that the adequacy of the information can be assessed.

2. *Justified conclusions:*
The recommendations made by Extension staff should be explicitly justified, so that participants in Extension programs can assess them.

3. *Objective reporting:*
The evaluation procedures should provide safeguards to protect the evaluation findings and reports against distortion by the personal feelings and biases of any party to the evaluation.

3. *Objective presentations:*
Extension Services and staff should take steps to guard against distortions in Extension materials and presentations due to personal feelings and biases.
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As people who know the value of information-based decision making, Extension educators are in an ideal position to provide leadership in evaluation processes, both in conducting evaluations and in using evaluation information for program improvement.

By understanding the similarities between Extension and evaluation, Extension staff may become involved in evaluations with greater confidence, even instructing evaluators in the principles of Extension, so as to improve the practice of evaluation. By applying the new standards of evaluation, Extension personnel can improve both the usefulness and quality of evaluation. At stake is the quality of both evaluations and Extension programs.

Footnotes

1. J. Paul Leagans and Charles P. Loomis, *Behavioral Change in Agriculture* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1971); Ronald G. Havelock, *The Change Agent's Guide to Innovation in Education* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Education Technology Publications, 1973); Everett Rogers and F. Shoemaker, *Communication of Innovations* (New York: Free Press, 1971); and Chris Argyris, *Theory in Practice: Increasing Professional Effectiveness* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1974).
2. Michael Q. Patton, *Utilization-Focused Evaluation* (Beverly Hills, California: Sage Publications, 1978); Michael Q. Patton, *Practical Evaluation* (Beverly Hills, California: Sage Publications, 1982); Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln, *Effective Evaluation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1981); and Lee J. Cronbach, *Designing Evaluations of Educational and Social Programs* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1982).
3. The Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, *Standards for Evaluations of Educational Programs, Projects, and Materials* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981).
4. An audio- and video-tape series on the application of the new standards to Extension is available from the Agricultural Extension Service, University of Minnesota.