

## Development of Learning-Oriented Evaluation for HRD Programs

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*This study examines key theoretical principles of learning-oriented evaluation for HRD programs. Practical guidelines for the implementation of learning-oriented evaluation are also developed based on the related literature. This study suggests that evaluation should be a learning process in which information and knowledge are socially constructed and used for individual, group, and organizational learning.*

Keywords: Learning-Oriented Evaluation, Evaluation Use, Organizational Learning

There has been growing attention on evaluation of Human Resource Development (HRD) programs in organizations. As the importance of optimizing human potential in the competitive business environment has been increasing, organization leaders need to learn more about how HRD programs operate and can be improved. Accordingly, HRD practitioners have paid more attention to evaluation of HRD programs and its impacts on the organization. On the other hand, HRD scholars have grown skeptical about the effectiveness of Kirkpatrick (1998)'s evaluation approach that has dominated training evaluation over the last forty years. This has resulted in an increasing number of studies that aim to enhance HRD evaluation theory and practice and search for an alternative evaluation approach to HRD programs.

Despite this growing attention, evaluation of HRD programs in organizations, especially in the private sector, is still problematic. First, evaluation has not been widely implemented (Swanson & Holton, 2001). Russ-fit and Preskill (2001) explain ten reasons why evaluation is ignored in organizations. Among the reasons, the top reason is organization members' misunderstanding of evaluation purpose and role. The second reason is organization members' fear of the impact of evaluation findings. In general, evaluation is negatively perceived by organization members. This makes evaluation difficult to implement.

Second, evaluation approaches to HRD programs are very limited. Most of them are based on or are variations of Kirkpatrick (1998)'s four level evaluation approach. In spite of its strengths, such as simplicity, flexibility, and popularity, Kirkpatrick's approach has not provided a comprehensive information and understanding of how HRD programs work and influence organizational members. As Holton (1996) indicates, Kirkpatrick's approach is not grounded in a philosophy or theory of evaluation. In addition, the majority of evaluations based on his four-level approach have been conducted only at level one (reaction) or level two (learning) (Dixon, 1987)

Third, there is a significant lack of evaluation use. Preskill and Caracelli (1997) conduct a survey asking American Evaluation Association (AEA) members about various conceptions of evaluation use. Although their study does not target evaluation of HRD programs, its result shows that nonuse and misuse of evaluation are critical issues. In fact, many HRD scholars and practitioners have focused only on instrumental use of evaluation results and the evaluation results are not actually used (Russ-Eft, Atwood, & Eggherman, 2002). Some researchers emphasize use of evaluation to justify the bottom line impact of HRD programs (Philips, 1997; Swanson, 1998). Yet, there is lack of research and discussion on conceptual use of evaluation and the link between evaluation and organizational learning.

I believe that these problems are driven from critical misconceptions about evaluation of HRD programs, such as evaluation is bad and unnecessary, evaluation means a smile sheet, and evaluation use is not important. The future of HRD evaluation will be shaped depending on the extent to which we can overcome the problems. The success of HRD evaluation relies on whether we can change these misunderstandings. In this regard, academic efforts for developing new evaluation approaches to HRD programs are asked in order to improve the existing HRD evaluation theory as well practice. New approaches should be more responsive to organization members and their needs and be more systemic and comprehensive in investigating the quality of HRD programs. In addition, they ought to contribute to increase the usability of evaluation in the private sector.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the development of learning-oriented evaluation for HRD programs. In order to achieve this, I first define the notion of evaluation as learning process. Key theoretical principles

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Underlying learning-oriented evaluation are also examined based on the related literature. Further, I develop practical guidelines for successful implementation of learning-oriented evaluation. Learning-oriented evaluation, which aims at fostering different types and levels of learning through evaluation, can change negative conceptions of evaluation to a learning opportunity. Evaluators as well as stakeholders can have opportunities to broaden and deepen their knowledge and understanding of HRD programs from this kind of evaluation approach. Learning-oriented evaluation also can help organizational members consider evaluation as ongoing learning experiences rather than as a one-time event. Moreover, it can produce useful and comprehensive information of the program being evaluated. So, evaluators and stakeholders can develop diverse ways to enhance evaluation use and to improve HRD programs. Evaluation should be an opportunity and catalyst to learning in organizations.

### **Evaluation as Learning Process**

Several evaluation researchers, such as Lee Cronbach, Gretchen Rossi, John Owen, Hallie Preskill, and Rosalie Torres, have emphasized evaluation as a process of fostering learning. Although there are variations in explaining the learning dimension of evaluation among them, their major focus is on helping evaluators as well as stakeholders learn from evaluation, so they can deepen their understanding, obtain new insights, take visible actions, and improve quality of an evaluand – product, program or process being evaluated.

Cronbach and his colleagues contend that “evaluation is a process by which society learns about itself” (Cronbach et al., 1981, p.2). According to them, evaluation should be a learning opportunity that enables stakeholders to know better about the program, understand multiple perspectives, and thus make wise choices for the program improvement. In doing this, an evaluator need to play a role as an educator that facilitates sharing as well as providing information. Although their main concern is to help members of the “policy-shaping community”, their contention provides at least two important points of view for evaluation of HRD programs. First, they suggest a different view on the role of an evaluator from the traditional one. According to them, it is not an evaluator’s task to decide whether the program is good enough. Instead, the evaluator provides information which stakeholders may want to take into account in forming their judgments. Second, Cronbach et al. (1981) believe that things can be changed because of stakeholders’ learning through evaluation. Evaluation can directly or indirectly change stakeholders’ understanding and behavior, whether it is intended or unintended, throughout evaluation. Accumulations of these changes can affect procedure and culture of the program and other parts of organization processes, so in the long run, the organization can be changed.

The concept of evaluation as learning process is further explained by Preskill and Torres (1999), who suggest the notion of *evaluative inquiry* as a new form of evaluation for learning. Since organizations have experiencing continuous and dramatic changes due to advanced technology, workforce diversity, and globalization, continuous learning and development becomes the key for organizations to survive (Dixon, 1992; Ruona, Lynham, & Chermack, 2003). Under consideration of this feature, Preskill and Torres (1999) emphasize that evaluation should be integrated into daily work practice in organizations and thus it ought to be an ongoing inquiry for learning. In this sense, they introduce *evaluative inquiry*, which encourages organization members to have chances of exploring, reflecting, questioning and discussing critical organization issues based on the evaluation logic and process. They believe that this will bring out enhanced organization capacity for continuous learning as well as personal and professional development of organization members.

Learning through evaluation can occur at individual, group, and organizational level. Individual learning can occur when individuals are able to alter their perceptions and knowledge of the program from the evaluation process and findings, achieve new insights, and take actions based on the insights (Rossman & Rallis, 2000). Learning from evaluation at the group level can take place when individuals share their experiences, knowledge, and insights through dialogue and participate in collaborative learning situations. Since evaluation involves, in most cases, different groups of stakeholders, it is important to provide chances of communicating across the groups and understanding diverse perspectives of the program that will increase the potential of stakeholders for learning. Organizational learning from evaluation can occur when individuals and groups disseminate their learning and knowledge obtained from evaluation throughout the organization. This will lead to organizational change and development.

### **Key Theoretical Bases of Learning-Oriented Evaluation**

Learning-oriented evaluation is concerned with developing the potential of stakeholders as well as evaluators by providing opportunities to learn and stimulating social interactions among stakeholders and evaluators in a given

context. In this section, I examine theoretical assumptions of learning-oriented evaluation in terms of its claims on knowledge construction, evaluation use, and organizational influence.

#### *Knowledge Construction*

Most researchers who advocate learning-oriented evaluation emphasize participation and ownership of stakeholders in creating information and knowledge useful. This assertion is based on the belief that knowledge and values are socially constructed and transited rather than exist independently from the social world waiting to be revealed by technically expert evaluators. Therefore, stakeholders should be active participants in construction of knowledge through evaluation and use of the knowledge in their work. In fact, HRD programs involve adult learners in the workplace. Compared to children, adults are more self-directed and learn from their experiences. They tend to have their own willingness, motivation, intention, and styles for learning. These characteristics of adult learners enable learning-oriented evaluation of HRD programs to be a platform for stakeholders to construct and use their own knowledge.

From the constructivist view, learning is also a process of meaning making (Preskill & Torres, 2000; Rossman & Rallis, 2000). Individuals and groups learn by understanding and making meanings of their experiences. In this sense, learning from evaluation is socially situated and is mediated through stakeholders' previous knowledge and experiences. Constructions of meanings are influenced by specific historical, political, geographical, and cultural practice and discourses in a given context (Greene, 2000). These constructions are multiple, contingent, and contextual. It is, therefore, important through learning-oriented evaluation to involve and discover multiple constituencies each representing different perspectives.

#### *Evaluation Use*

Although the concept of evaluation use is still diverging and expanding (Shulha & Cousins, 1997), there are mainly three different kinds of evaluation use based on the purposes they serve. They are instrumental, conceptual, and symbolic use (Weiss, 1998). Learning-oriented evaluation can be employed for instrumental, conceptual, and/or symbolic purpose.

Instrumental use of evaluation aims at providing information for decision makers. Evaluation findings and recommendations are used to give feedback into decision making processes for the program. According to Weiss (1998), this kind of use is fairly common under three conditions. First, the application of evaluation findings is relatively non-controversial. Second, the change that occurs as a result of evaluation is relatively small-scale. Lastly, internal and external environments of the program are relatively stable without dramatic change in leadership, fund, and stakeholders. If evaluators and stakeholders learn from findings of learning-oriented evaluation and make informed decisions regarding operation, continuation, or improvement of the program, this evaluation is instrumentally used to produce information for decision-making.

Conceptual use of evaluation is concerned with changing and developing, through evaluation, stakeholders' understanding of what the program is and does. Many aspects of learning-oriented evaluation are connected to this kind of use, because learning-oriented evaluation focuses primarily on the evaluation process and conceptual change (learning) of the people who are involved in evaluation. In fact, stakeholders can obtain new ideas and insights about the program from evaluation findings. However, they can learn even more about merits and limitations of the program and possible directions for action by engaging in the evaluation process. The notion of Patton (1997)'s *process use* is similar to this kind of use. Patton (1997) highlights evaluators as well as stakeholders' changes as participating in the evaluation process.

Process use refers to and is indicated by individual changes in thinking and behavior, and program or organizational changes in procedures and culture, that occur among those involved in evaluation as a result of the learning that occurs during the evaluation process. (p. 90)

Preskill and Torres (2000) describe this kind of use as a form of individual, team, and organizational learning. They suggest that when individuals participate in the evaluation process that is collaborative and guided by dialogue, reflection, and critical inquiry, learning occurs not only at the individual level but also at the group and organizational level.

Symbolic or political use of evaluation is intended to strengthen one's positive or negative opinions about the program (Marra, 2003). For example, program managers know what is not working and how problems can be solved. Thus, they use evaluation to legitimize their position and gain supports from other members. Moreover, the very existence of evaluation can influence organization members. For example, when learning-oriented evaluation is carried out in the organization that never or little has employed this type of evaluation approach, the presence of learning-oriented evaluation creates a level of interests among organization members and makes them be aware of needs for learning and change.

### *Organizational Influence*

Evaluation is performed within an organizational context. Learning through evaluation is critically influenced by the organization's goals, systems, structures, and culture. Rogers and Hough (1995) claim that focus, methods, and management of evaluation should reflect realistic assumptions about how the organization works. Without understanding of how individual, group, and organizational learning occurs in the organization, learning-oriented evaluation cannot be successfully implemented and its benefits will be significantly reduced.

In addition, several researchers stress that evaluation capacity building is critical in order to "continuously create and sustain overall organizational processes that make quality evaluation and its uses routine" (Compton, Baizerman, & Stockdil, p.1). The success of learning-oriented evaluation influences and is influenced by the organization's infrastructure that supports continuous learning. Therefore, structures, policies, procedures of the organization need to incorporate and maintain learning through evaluation. Desirable organization systems, structures, and culture make it easy to share evaluation information and make it possible to work collaboratively among different stakeholder groups. These organization features also allow organization members to try new things and to consider mistakes as opportunities for learning. It is obvious that the organization including such desirable systems, structures, and culture is motivated to provide organizational members financial, technological, and human resources for learning.

Moreover, organization members should understand the importance and potential of learning from evaluation. Especially, leaderships at all levels of the organization ought to support and consider evaluation as a means for individual, group, and organizational learning. Organization leaders at top positions need to provide a vision for learning through evaluation and encourage organization members to value and prioritize evaluation. Leaders at the program levels need to realize their responsibility for continuous program improvement and appreciate partnership with an evaluator in creating evaluation information.

Because effective use of learning-oriented evaluation sometimes requires organizational changes, there is an issue of how to deal with organization members' resistance to changes. Organization members tend to defend the status quo and have negative expectations of a new evaluation approach. According to Taut and Branus (2003), organization members have fears that they can be criticized or lose their jobs as a result of evaluation. These fears are often rooted in lack of trust among organization members and misunderstanding of what learning-oriented evaluation can be and do for them. Therefore, it is essential that the development of learning-oriented evaluation should be based on shared trust, value, and belief that evaluation can be a catalyst for individual, group, and organizational learning.

### **Key Practical Guidelines for Learning-Centered Evaluation**

Learning-oriented evaluation is somewhat similar to other evaluation approaches that also emphasize learning as an outcome of evaluation, such as participatory, stakeholder-focused, empowerment, or utilization-oriented approach. To varying degrees, these approaches position an evaluator as a facilitator of learning from evaluation in which stakeholders learn about themselves as well as the program. However, learning-oriented evaluation for HRD programs is distinguishable from other approaches in that it focuses on increasing the potential of stakeholders and contributing to achieve organizational learning. In this section, I explain crucial strategies for the practice of learning-oriented evaluation. I develop one strategy for each evaluation stage that should be a focus or at least be gained attention.

#### *Purpose and Audience*

*Identify multiple stakeholders and their information (learning) needs.* The main concern of learning-oriented evaluation is to enlighten people involved. Therefore, it is important to include diverse audiences and understand what they want to know and learn through evaluation. Different purposes can be developed depending on the context- the program or intervention being evaluated, problems identified, stakeholders engaged, a type of the organization, and so on. For instance, one purpose of learning-oriented evaluation may be to provide information for decisions needed to be made regarding the program's improvement and expansion. Another purpose may include gaining a better understanding of the program's effects on different groups. Whatever the purpose of the evaluation may be, an evaluator needs to ensure that the purpose(s) of the evaluation is formed based on diverse stakeholders' needs for learning and action. Diverse audiences, such as organization leaders, program directors, staff, trainers, trainees, and community members can be identified. From the beginning of the evaluation, the evaluator needs to facilitate the stakeholders to be informed of different issues and to prioritize them. Thus, they can decide what they need to know and what purpose is appropriate and feasible in a given situation. The purpose(s) of the evaluation chosen should be clearly stated and be effectively shared with the stakeholders.

### *Questions*

*Develop a set of questions in negotiations with stakeholders.* Evaluation questions are very important, since these determine the boundary as well as the focus of the evaluation. Evaluation questions also help to further define the purpose of the evaluation and can influence decisions about evaluation design and methods for data collection. The evaluator and stakeholders may start from overarching and broad questions. For instance, what do or don't we know about the program?, What do we need to know?, How does the program work?, How does the program achieve its goals?, and so on. It may be better to develop open-ended questions, because open-ended questions likely are more responsive to change of stakeholders' needs as well as evaluation environments and produce rich information.

The process of developing evaluation questions calls for intense negotiations with stakeholders. Learning-oriented evaluation seeks to involve diverse stakeholders. So, it is not easy to come to agreement on a set of questions across different groups. While certain things are crucial to some stakeholders, others may not agree with that. Therefore, the evaluator needs to encourage stakeholders to explore their assumptions and values underpinning their support of certain questions. In this case, stakeholders can articulate why particular questions are more important and relevant to the purpose of the evaluation. Furthermore, they can understand what others think and expect from the evaluation. Through these processes, the evaluator and stakeholders can develop deeper understanding and new insights about the program (conceptual use). This also increases the likelihood that meaningful and useful data will be obtained as carrying out the evaluation (Cousins, Donohue, & Bloom, 1996). In addition, stakeholders who attained deeper knowledge and understanding about the program can influence other organizational members' understanding of the program and the people involved. Both the evaluator and stakeholders need to make key inputs in the negotiations for developing evaluation questions. For example, stakeholders can bring knowledge of the program and the organization, while the evaluator is able to indicate limits to the evaluation given resources available.

### *Design and Methods*

*Select the most relevant, effective, and appropriate design and methods for data collection.* The main focus in selecting proper evaluation design and methods is on understanding which design and methods will produce the best possible data to adequately answer evaluation questions. According to Preskill and Torres (1999), the evaluator and stakeholders can consider at least four factors in making decisions regarding evaluation design and methods.

- Preferred methods of those experienced in data collection and analysis activities.
- Prior experiences of team members with data collection and analysis activities.
- Unexamined notions, perceptions, or prior knowledge about the organization's culture
- Perceived methodological, time, or other logistical constraints (p.101).

The evaluator should not employ a particular design or methods without having the expertise to use them. Also, resources and time available for data collection need to be checked before determining a design and methods. In consultation with stakeholders, the evaluator can make decisions about an overall evaluation design – experiment, quasi-experiment, systems analysis, case study, or participatory process, so on – and specific data collection and analysis methods – questionnaires, standardized measures, interviews, and observations, so on. Many researchers recommend that use of multiple information sources and methods is more likely to generate evaluation data that represent accurate and true indications of the program (Patton, 1997; Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2000).

### *Criteria for Judging Program Quality*

*Clarify stakeholders' assumptions of the program quality.* There is often confusion or difference among diverse stakeholders about evaluation criteria of the program should be. Even though they agree on a certain constitution of the program quality, for example effectiveness, or productivity, they may have different assumptions about what effectiveness or productivity means. Therefore, Evaluation criteria need to be defined based on shared opinions and similar assumptions of the program quality across different groups of stakeholders.

Developing evaluation criteria is a contextually sensitive matter, so that there is no single and objective standard out there to be used for HRD programs. Evaluation criteria should be mutually defined among the evaluator and stakeholders in a given context. One of the problems that HRD evaluation has faced is that "satisfaction" of customers or trainees has been overused to determine merit and worth of HRD programs. Due to loosely employing Kirkpatrick's evaluation approach, satisfaction or reaction has become the key criteria to judge HRD programs even when satisfaction is not actually relevant to the quality of the program being evaluated.

### *Reporting*

*Share final findings with all stakeholders.* Some researchers emphasize on reporting to a certain group of stakeholders, for example intended users (Patton, 1997), influential program staff (Owen, Lamber, & Stringet, 1994; Rossman & Rallis, 2000), premising that use of evaluation findings can be ensured by them. However, when considering the importance of information as a major source for learning, evaluation information should be reported to and shared with all of the stakeholders. This does not mean that every stakeholder needs to have a same type of report. Various versions of reports—short or long, electric or printed—can be used. Even though a thick and comprehensive report can describe findings, recommendations, and implications in details, it is not always necessary for all stakeholders to receive such report, and it takes high cost to produce it. Mattson (2003) studies managers' perceptions of different types of evaluation reports in terms of their usefulness for decision making. The study shows that managers tend to use evaluation information more when it is reported in a way that is shorter in length and higher in comprehensibility. In addition to written evaluation reports, verbal presentations can be used for reporting evaluation findings. Sometimes, presentations can be more effective in informing and stimulating stakeholders for learning and action, because the evaluator and stakeholders can have chances to directly discuss evaluation information, ask questions, and voice reactions or concerns.

### *Participation*

*Create genuine forms of stakeholder participation.* Learning-oriented evaluation recognizes the importance of including multiple stakeholders' views. In this sense, the evaluator needs to provide opportunities over time for diverse stakeholders to better understand benefits and limitations of the program by engaging in the evaluation process. Stakeholders are not only relevant and appropriate sources of evaluation information, but they also play a role in creating evaluation practice as well (Cousins, Donohue, & Bloom, 1996; Greene, 1988). Therefore, the evaluator should work collaboratively with stakeholders in defining and developing many aspects of the evaluation. Diverse stakeholders' participation increases the likelihood of their commitment to evaluation and use of evaluation findings. Stakeholders' participation also increases the likelihood that individual, group, and organizational learning take place through collaborative group efforts. Even though it is necessary that multiple stakeholder groups participate in the evaluation process, it is often difficult to achieve this element within realities of the program operations.

### *Use*

*Provide ongoing support for stakeholders to integrate learning into their daily work.* If learning-oriented evaluation is successfully implemented as intended, use should not be a problem since use is integral to learning through evaluation. In other words, if individual, group, and organization learning occur during the evaluation process, this means that intended use of evaluation is achieved. As already mentioned, in addition to use of evaluation results, there is conceptual or process use that is important and needs to obtain more attention from HRD professionals. Again, stakeholders' participation in the evaluation process enhances learning and thus increases evaluation use. Moreover, use of evaluation is not the solo responsibility of the evaluator, because the evaluator and stakeholders are partners and co-producers in generating evaluation information as well as forming evaluation practice. Therefore, a collective commitment is required to apply learning into the program operations and outcomes.

Rather than a one time event, evaluation needs to be a force for continuing efforts for learning and action. As a means of integrating learning from evaluation into daily work, Preskill and Torres (1999) propose that the evaluator and stakeholders collaboratively work to develop an action plan for implementation of recommendations based on evaluation findings. According to Preskill and Torres (1999), after sharing evaluation information with stakeholders, the evaluator should encourage stakeholders to consider various action alternatives, choose among them, and develop an action plan to implement the alternative(s) selected. To maximize use of evaluation findings, the evaluator can work with stakeholders to implement program or organizational changes recommended by the evaluation. However, these collaborative endeavors need to be based on other organizational members' trust and support.

## **Contribution to HRD Research and Practice**

As the importance of evaluation in organizations has increased, there have been academic endeavors that suggest alternative approaches to evaluation of HRD programs. The notion of evaluation for learning has influenced HRD scholars and practitioners to expand their perception of evaluation use and see a clearer link between evaluation and

learning in organizations. However, there are still increasing needs for developing and articulating learning-oriented evaluation in which information and knowledge are socially constructed, and learning is facilitated by people and their social interactions. There is also a little theoretical discussion and practical applications of how this kind of evaluation approach helps to better develop organization members and enhance the quality of HRD programs. In this regard, this study attempt to provide conceptual as well as practical information needed when developing an evaluation for learning. Future research may need to take a deeper look at theoretical background of learning-oriented evaluation. Also, more empirical studies should be conducted to support evaluation as a means of individual, group, and organizational learning. In addition, it is necessary to investigate how and when the organization capacity for learning influences the development of learning-oriented evaluation for HRD programs.

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