

A 21st Century Perspective: Using a Client-Centered/Responsive Approach to Evaluating Large-Scale Online Teacher Professional Development

Abstract

As we move into the 21st century, keeping teachers abreast of the current and rapidly changing knowledge-based society, and enabling them to continue to be effective at educating our youth, is why new legislation and other nation- and state-wide initiatives lay emphasis on the importance of providing teachers with “high-quality,” sustained, and intensive professional development. Now more than ever we are seeing the online medium as becoming a more practical and integral part of teacher training. As states are making efforts to meet the need of keeping teachers' knowledge current in new and expanding ways, there is an increasing need to research and effectively evaluate these methods in ways that can contribute to their success and improvement. This need for more evidence of effectiveness is especially great in the field of online professional development where little is currently known about best practices for design and implementation (Whitehouse, Briet, McCloskey, Ketelhut, & DeDe, 2006). This paper describes one such effort, which uses a client centered/responsive approach to evaluate a high-stakes, large-scale online professional development project.

Introduction

Florida Online Reading Professional Development (FOR-PD), Florida's first large-scale statewide online professional development project, has served as one avenue to meet the reading professional development needs of Florida educators. Funded by the Florida Department of Education, FOR-PD is one of the leading national projects of its kind (Kleiman, 2004). The free 14-week online course was designed to enable pre-K12 teachers to keep abreast with emerging standards, current scientifically-based research, best instructional practices, and the ever-changing literacy needs of an increasingly diverse group of students. Specifically, it was developed as a vehicle for about 50,000 Florida's teachers to meet Competency 2 of the add-on reading endorsement: *Foundations of Research-Based Practices* (see <http://justreadflorida.com/endorsement/planning.asp#chart>). The highly collaborative project is housed, and was developed, at the University of Central Florida and, since 2003, it has provided services to over 27,000 educators and services all 67 Florida school districts, seven state universities, and six community college Educator Preparation Institutes. Most recently, in the fall 2006 semester, over 2,500 teachers enrolled.

Because the FOR-PD project meets a high-stakes need for a large and diverse group of teachers to remain highly qualified according to No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, keeping the project in a loop of continuous improvement remains a major focus of the project's evaluation design. Over the past four years, or 12-contiguous semesters, the systems within the project have been in a constant state of redesign and improvement. Often, results from one semester are acted upon quickly enough to impact improvements for the following semester and sometimes even quicker. Through ongoing analysis of massive amounts of the rich data that FOR-PD's technological framework

offers, much has been learned. Not only has the project provided evidence about best practices to evaluate large-scale online delivery, but more specifically, about how to assess well the quality of professional development efforts that build and support the knowledge teachers need for providing effective instruction in grades preK-12.

Since all teachers need ongoing and effective professional development to help them sustain relevant content knowledge and pedagogical expertise, several key questions arise which are supported by the project's evaluation design including:

- What impact can online professional development have on preK-12 teachers' knowledge of scientifically based reading research and classroom practice?
- What best practices exist that best develop teachers' knowledge about scientifically-based reading research, effective reading instructional practices, and the reading process in preK-12 grades?
- What kinds of support and infrastructure in online delivery best meet the needs of participating teachers and those who facilitate online courses?

To best assist the project in serving participating teachers, FOR-PD evaluation staff uses a client-centered or responsive design rather than taking the more commonly used "preordinate" approach to evaluation which relies purely on pre-specified program objectives, objective tests, formal reports and formal communications. The responsive approach has proved to work well for FOR-PD because it builds on the preordinate idea of comparing intended and observed outcomes and orients itself more directly, to the "full countenance" of the program. Robert Stake developed the client-centered philosophical model in the late 1960s and early 1970s and by 1975, published his well known anthropological model, labeling it "Responsive Evaluation" (Stake, 1975). According to Stake "an educational evaluation is responsive if it orients more directly to program activities than to program intents; responds to audience requirement for information; and if the different value-perspectives present are referred to in reporting the success and failure of the program" (p. 14).

Like other responsive evaluation designs, the FOR-PD evaluation process emerges and changes according to need, is mostly qualitative, and encourages diversity and allows space for a representative group of stakeholders to make their own judgments and have voice. In each phase, to gain their perspective, the evaluation team interviews groups of facilitators, district-level contacts, FOR-PD staff, and teachers taking the course (participants). Focus groups are also conducted. Concern for whether participants' content area, grade level, and experience and whether the participants are pre- or in-service teachers is also taken into consideration; and for the first time this semester, classroom observations are being conducted to better determine just how the content learned is being implemented across different content areas and grade levels. Other data analyzed are in the form of document review: Random-stratified samples of participants' work are analyzed, to assess what teachers learn and plan to do at multiple points during the course.

Other components of FOR-PD evaluation are more quantitative in nature. Each semester facilitator and participant end-of-course surveys are analyzed. An "implementation survey" is also used, which is administered to participants several months after a course

concludes to help discern whether FOR-PD had any lasting impact on classroom instruction and any other changes that teachers may have made in their practice. Although most items on these surveys are multiple choice, yes/no, or Likert-type, each survey contains open-ended items. While some questions remain constant so that comparisons can be made to assess the effectiveness across several semesters/years, others change based on new questions that arise. Pre- post-test results from a test of reading knowledge, and results from course quizzes are also analyzed to help determine project effectiveness.

Typical of the responsive approach, FOR-PD evaluation components, although well planned and articulated, are not always predetermined and consensus in the results is not necessarily always achieved. According to Stufflebeam (2001), whose monograph, *Evaluation Models*, describes and assesses twenty-two evaluation approaches:

Client centered evaluation is perhaps the leading entry in the “relativistic school of evaluation,” which calls for a pluralistic, flexible, interactive, holistic, subjective, constructivist, and service-oriented approach. The approach is relativistic because it seeks no final authoritative conclusion, interpreting findings against stakeholders’ different and often conflicting values (p. 63).

Because of this conflict, there is typically a little “give and take” and based on some results of the highly-participatory nature of the FOR-PD evaluation design, what action items should result are often difficult to determine, changes to processes are sometimes redirected midstream, and while mistakes do occur, concentration lies with forming solutions and taking corrective action. Still, while the process is not always smooth, and at times may be ambiguous, what *is* important is that the climate that the responsiveness creates is one of openness and frequent input representing each group involved. This open and frequent communication is precisely why--out of the twenty-two evaluation approaches that Stufflebeam assessed in his monograph--he ranked the client-centered approach as one of the best. He concluded, that “clearly approaches are showing a strong orientation toward stakeholder involvement and use of multiple methods” (p. 89).

Not all of the components to the FOR-PD evaluation are used every semester. It depends, on which questions need to be answered and what fires need to be put out and corrective action taken, which are all based on previous results and inputs from the project staff and other stakeholders. Each semester as processes are reevaluated and new situations and ideas occur, some aspects of the evaluation process evolve and others may disappear. When it is found that a section of the course or an assessment is no longer efficient, changes are made; and then the following semester they are reevaluated to determine what effect occurs. An example of how FOR-PD evaluation shifts is where recently, when it was found that approximately 50 content-area teachers from the same high school were taking the course, it was decided that a case study would be conducted which will result in a shift in what had been planned for. This was a good opportunity to examine how the project might impact of professional development on student reading achievement and teacher content knowledge at the school level.

One of the major strengths of the client-centered/responsive approach, according to Stufflebeam (2001), is that it involves an action-research component where individuals involved are helped and encouraged to conduct, their own research and evaluations, and use the results to make improvements and increase their own understandings. At FOR-PD project evaluators have worked very closely with staff that manage each of the major processes to examine, analyze, and report out on their own data in more meaningful ways. To explain how that has occurred, recently a member of the evaluation team worked closely with FOR-PD's Quality Assurance Specialist. The QA specialist provides tailored feedback, support, encouragement, and data to facilitators about their online facilitation and also about students who lagging behind in the course. She also offers timely progress report to participants who are not progressing at the expected level and pace. Facilitators appreciate the timely guidance for making important communications and the soft reminders about upcoming/or missed responsibilities that quality assurance checks provides and fewer students get behind; and because major concerns and goals were acted upon more systematically, the process became more streamlined. The adjustments paid off in the form of higher completion rates and increased communication between facilitator-participants, facilitator-FOR-PD, and participants with the FOR-PD staff. Later, in retrospect, the QA Specialist has become more skilled at storing and analyzing data, which has in turn led to more useful-sophisticated and timely reports. Her job not only seemed easier, but she learned more about the process and came up with some new action steps to make it even better. She was excited about negotiating her ideas with others involved and became more of an active part of the change process.

Results and/or Conclusions

Since the data set for this section is based on research in-progress and is still being compiled and analyzed, the demographics and results put forth, in this and the next section, describe Phase IV data.

FOR-PD is meeting its objective of providing a high-quality, online professional development for research based reading instruction for Florida teachers. For Phase IV, the majority of FOR-PD participants report the content is relevant and has high application for the classroom. Facilitators perceived a positive impact on participants' knowledge. Focus group data illustrate a belief by facilitators that FOR-PD helped participants improve their reading instruction and they also believed that impact would positively impact student achievement in those classrooms. District interviews confirmed that most facilitators are viewed as strong literacy leaders and all agreed that FOR-PD had an affect on improving teacher knowledge and practice in their districts.

Participants experience the use of much scientifically-based reading research and instruction as learners during enrollment of FOR-PD. Analysis of survey results show evidence that most (83%) of the teachers now use the scientifically-based strategies they learned in their classroom instruction. Over half indicated that they use those strategies one-to-four times a week. Differentiated instruction techniques learned were regularly being used by 74% of the respondents; many (77%) indicated that their classroom

environment was more print rich; and 69% of those who took the course had begun using screening diagnosis and progress monitoring more effectively. The survey respondents also indicated that they believed that the course helped them to help their students learn (93%).

Participants showed substantial gains in reading knowledge after completing FOR-PD. Results indicate that there was a statistically significant change ($t(1491) = 43.36$, $p < .0005$) in participants' reading knowledge from the pretest (mean = 26.9, SD = 4.7) to the posttest (mean = 36.7, SD = 8.2); that a large effect size (eta squared value = .558) was obtained; and that a true mean difference at the 95% confidence interval ranged from 9.4 to 10.3. Of those enrolled in Phase IV, about 35% of participants were high school teachers, 43% middle, 14% elementary 2% K-8, and 6% classified as "other." Forty-two percent were language arts or reading teachers, 15% ESE, and 9% ESOL. About 16% were general education (mostly elementary), and the rest (8%) "other." Many (78%) indicated they were working on the reading endorsement (add-on certification) and 20% were transitioning from other fields.

Conclusion

Client-based responsive evaluation has been developed (see Albma and Stake, 2001; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; and Stake, 1975) as one alternative for the shortcomings related to relying too much on more experimental methods. While experimental methods are valued, they are not always the best fit for projects like FOR-PD. This is due, in part to a) the fast-moving pace; b) large amounts of rich qualitative data available; c) human elements of online professional development; and d) the lack of attention to the implementation and process of programs and a strong benefit of hearing and the voices of major stakeholders.

FOR-PD evaluation reports have shown that FOR-PD remains focused on its initiatives and operates in a loop of continuous improvement. Instruments and methods are frequently updated, stemming from program successes and challenges, and from input from all major stakeholders. It has also found that the collaborative evaluation process played a key role in understanding and building on the the project's strengths and weaknesses. The process of negotiation, which emerges from the conversations that the stakeholders have with each other and the evaluation staff, has helped establish a coherent framework that informed the project and helped it meet accountability requirements in a successful manner. Overall effectiveness can be attributed to the ongoing collaboration, involvement, and participatory-decision making between the evaluation team and the project leadership team and representatives from all other FOR-PD stakeholders; and as a result of keeping communication lines active and open, project changes are data-driven and quickly implemented, a common language of goals and objectives is inherent, and involvement in key decision making is had by all.

So, who benefited from this evaluation? All or a few? Our data shows all. This evaluation approach helped all involved co-construct knowledge about the project, its audience, and the process of evaluation. The evaluation approach was sensitive to the locality of the project, its needs, audience, scope, and also to its staff. The evaluator was very

knowledgeable about the needs, interests, and characteristics of FOR-PD staff and also FOR-PD participants and facilitators. She had a robust knowledge of the people she worked with and their concerns. We explored alternative ways to collect data. We measured the benefits for facilitators, participants, and staff. We collected information about the effectiveness of our partnerships with school districts, universities, and community colleges. We identified project elements we would like to learn more about. We continue to use the findings to strengthen program elements, retain facilitators, participants, and staff, create visibility, provide legitimacy, and also generate funding. This client-centered/responsive evaluation model offers a promising alternative to evaluating large-scale online professional development projects. The goal of evaluation is to produce information that can guide the ongoing development of a project. As the FOR-PD project moves in unique and somewhat expected ways, the evaluation efforts will continue to be adapted to them and possibly directing the project to new ideas and challenges. Results from the implementation of this client-centered/responsive evaluation approach will contribute to our knowledge base on the effects of online large-scale professional development projects on teacher professional development and student learning.

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