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# **Evaluation of Literacy Training: As Viewed by Government Agencies, Educational Organizations, Business and Industry, and Literacy Providers**

*James Dinnan, L. Vern Pulling, Lea McGregor*

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Literacy programs have been around since the first settlers landed here. It is only in the last half of the eighties that major funding has started to become available to face the problems caused by a growing illiterate population. More extensive funding in the nineties is anticipated, but along with these support funds is a push for a concise reporting of their expenditures. Are we getting our money's worth? Accountability is crucial to acceptance or rejection of proposals at all levels of funding.

A major gap exists between the quantitative (numbers) outlook of many funders and the qualitative assessments often provided by the persons involved in the training. Strauss (1987) offers these observations:

Among social scientists a distinction is commonly drawn between quantitative and qualitative research. . . Qualitative researchers tend to lay considerable emphasis on situational and often structural contexts, in contrast to many quantitative researchers, whose work is multivariate but often weak on context. (p. 2)

The need for flexibility in assessing literacy programs is also noted by Ulmer and Dinnan (1981):

The evaluation model which follows suggests that evaluation is a process that extends to all the life roles of the adult student and, further, that the purpose of instruction is not only functional but also has application, in a sense, is to measure student achievement in terms of social, vocational, and personal gains in competence.

Federal and State government agencies usually provide a "request for proposal" with an outline of major items that will be checked when funding a given proposal. Among many items, a certain weight factor is provided for the evaluation section of the proposal. These data are usually expected to conform to the standard testing and statistical analysis procedures used for decades. To cite growth in self-esteem, social awareness, attitude change, or participation in a group activity as observations of human behavior is to court disaster in funding. Thus, the system of rewards reinforces using T-scores, analysis of variance, or multiple regression equation, when the data might reveal nothing about a person's relationship with his or her family or boss.

Educational institutions or private statistical companies are major sources relied upon by the funding agency for assessing data relative to growth or changes in behavior. These organizations are often called upon to help review proposals, set criteria, and recommend funding. Based upon past performance of evaluating new programs for funding, the numbers game is at the top of the list. Guidance for evaluating programs involving human behavior is sought not from the Sociology, Anthropology or Adult Education Departments but from the "Testing Bureau."

Business and Industry are by far the most involved in training and education for their employees. They look for outside help in organization, development, and evaluation of a program, but again, a cost-effective analysis must be presented if they are to be a viable part of an ever-changing growth pattern. The bottom line is production, cost effectiveness, and accountability. Measure production charts, measure absenteeism, measure accidents, measure, measure, measure; prove it with data.

Literacy providers, whether in group or individual programs, have not been part of the standard programs involved in the general distribution of funds but have been way out on the perimeter, begging for scraps—left-over books, rooms, personnel—and expected to self-fund by any means available. Evaluation has been required in "numbers," attendance, programs, "Test" growth, hours, participants, or any other number means they might provide.

Seldom have feelings, attitudes, informal assessments, or experience growth in class, at home, or at work been acceptable to a remote board of

directors, supervisors, government, or foundation, when the essence of the change observed in an individual should be the epitome of success.

Thus, agencies that provide funding must be made aware that valid alternative methods exist for assessing the production of change in human behavior; that, ideally, some form of numerical data will be present but that the concept of qualitative analysis is equal to, and often superior to, statistical data, which is often meaningless to the reader.

Providers must declare how, when, where, and why qualitative analysis will be used and must provide training in the use of these techniques, along with the quantitative data. Funders must be willing to accept the results of these collected discussions, notes, observations, and interviews as a valid data base for present and future funding.

Maybe if Literacy training finally gets into the mainstream of funding, a new humanistic *view* (Lytle, et al., 1989) of a large number of people and the changes in their various group interactions will be considered a significant contribution to the greater society and we will recognize the human person behind the frozen number.

## References

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