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Considering an Appreciative Approach to International Extension Evaluation

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Abstract

Programmatic evaluation has become a common practice in international extension education. Evaluation has primarily been used to report the outputs, outcomes and impacts of extension efforts. Sometimes an evaluation is done for formative reasons, to make programmatic improvements, and most often for summative reasons, as a justification for further funding. Depending upon the evaluator (or evaluative approach) the evaluation will include stakeholder input and focus on collecting data the stakeholder will ultimately use. Some have even gone so far as engaging in developmental evaluation which allows for ambiguity and changes in direction throughout the duration of an extension program. Despite the many ways the discipline evaluates, almost every evaluation takes a problem-solving approach where areas for improvement are identified. The purpose of this manuscript was to reflect upon past evaluation practice within the international extension literature and discuss the role appreciative evaluation can play as evaluation continues to inform international extension efforts.

Keywords: extension, evaluation, appreciative inquiry, utilization-focused evaluation

Introduction

Evaluation has become a common term in the realm of international extension education so it is easy to forget that it is a fairly new concept. Many consider evaluation a necessary evil, a form of assessment that tells us whether or not what we are doing is worthy of funding (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004). Evaluation has historically been an afterthought, with evaluators brought onto a team (or hired externally) to do a summative review of a program once it is completed and seeking additional funds (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006). Over the past 20 years, the usefulness of evaluation as a process rather than just producing an end product has emerged across disciplines including extension education (Patton, 1997). Process evaluations and formative evaluations of extension programs have also become more commonplace; designed to complement and inform summative evaluation. As a result, evaluators are more frequently being asked to be a part of the program planning team from its inception and often drive program development to greater success.

New approaches to evaluation have emerged as the field of evaluation has expanded and grown. Funders and extension professionals are seeing the value in taking different approaches, trying new things and pushing to see if evaluation needs to remain an external process or if the political dynamics of a program can intertwine and even drive the evaluative process (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006). In addition, the mindset of evaluators (and the evaluation culture) is shifting and changing, with many evaluators ensuring the evaluative process is closely aligned with the values of the people and organizations wanting evaluative measures and results.

Research has shown that examining what is wrong with something and recommending ways to fix it, even if the

evaluation is utilization-focused or collaborative in nature, is not always the best approach. In fact, many organizations have been taken beyond what they thought possible by focusing evaluative measures on uncovering how well a program is achieving its goals, what successes the program staff and overall organization is celebrating, and identifying strengths that then drive evaluative recommendations (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006). Given the emergent nature of international extension work, and its user-focused approach, one would think international extension professionals would be at the forefront of this shift and embracing an appreciative approach to evaluation of their programs. However, as a discipline, the work often comes first and the opportunity to reflect upon practice to ensure growth is missed. The purpose of this manuscript is to reflect upon past evaluation practice within the international extension literature and discuss the role evaluation can play as it continues to inform future international extension efforts. It is driven by the following questions:

1. How accepting, creative, innovative and forward-thinking have we been, as international agricultural and extension professionals, when considering how to evaluate our programs and processes?
2. Are we missing an opportunity to focus evaluation efforts on what is possible to obtain, rather than focusing on what is difficult to achieve?
3. Is it time to think about new ways to evaluate international extension programs and the power behind innovative approaches to evaluation?

Evaluation to Pass Judgment

Evaluation emerged as a necessity in the 1960's when the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act required that

school interventions be put in place to improve the education of disadvantaged students in the United States (U.S.) and local education agencies had to submit evaluation plans and summary reports in order to receive funds (Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2003; Russ-eft & Preskill, 2001). The push for accountability of U.S. funds in this one area had a rippling effect and within 15 years every U.S. federal grant required an assessment of a program's effectiveness and impact (House, 1993; Rossi et al., 2004). At this point in time there was not a field of evaluation, where experts focused on the study of evaluation practice, and the social scientists engaging in evaluation for fund accountability primarily relied on experimental and quasi-experimental designs. House (1993) stated "prior to 1965, evaluation was a minor activity, a sideline academics engaged in as extra consulting work" (p. 15). As a result, the lines between evaluation and research were blurry. Scriven (1991) delineated evaluation from research with his widely used definition of evaluation: "a process of determining the merit, worth, or value of something, or the product of that process" (p. 139).

This definition has been the foundation of many evaluations within the field of international agricultural and extension education because summative evaluation answers the question: Did the program work? Patton (2011) articulated summative evaluation "requires clear specifications of what the program intervention was in relation to intended outcomes" and that to "conduct a summative evaluation, the program must be identifiable, specifiable, stable, implementable, standardized, and replicable" (p. 37). Examples exist throughout the literature of the use of summative evaluation as an assessment of whether or not a program achieved its intended outcomes. Examples include Gockowski, Asamoah, David,

Gyamfi, and Kumi (2010) using a summative approach in an evaluation of farmer field school programs in Ghana. Udoh (1999) used this approach to evaluate a family support program in Nigeria. Another example is the use of summative evaluation by Jayaratne, Taylor, Edwards, Cartmell, and Henneberry (2017) as they examined the process and outcomes of the African Entrepreneur Fellows program.

Scriven (1991) argued that before a program underwent a summative evaluation it should go through a period of time where it is scrutinized, revised and improved upon. The process, now commonly referred to as formative evaluation, ensures the program or process is ready for rigorous summative testing. The formative evaluation concept spread quickly, with the term used for "any evaluation aimed at improving an intervention or model" (Patton, 2011, p. 37). While not as frequently found in the literature because formative evaluation is intended to provide programmatic direction rather than for scholarly activities, several examples can be discussed. Rodriguez and Andrade (2018) used a formative evaluation approach to uncover opportunities to further communication efforts regarding agriculture and nutrition education in Nepal. Seiler-Martinez, Murphrey, Wingenbach, and Lobardini (2018) used a formative approach to identify barriers to adoption of new practices in developing countries as a way for extension agents to inform their program development, specifically in Guatemala. Dragon and Place (2006) also used a formative approach to their evaluation of why farmers struggled with the adoption of Integrated Agricultural Systems in Costa Rica.

Focusing on the User

Many evaluations conducted by international extension professionals have taken an additional step and been focused on

evaluation use with evaluation conducted for and with stakeholders. Utilization-focused evaluation is an approach originally outlined by Michael Quinn Patton (1997) in the late 1970s that has caught momentum and evolved over time. Utilization-focused evaluation does what it states: focuses the evaluation on the user – whatever stakeholder, either internal or external, is most likely to use the results (Patton, 1997).

Utilization-focused evaluation often includes a collaborative or participatory component where “there is a significant degree of collaboration or cooperation between evaluators and stakeholders in planning and/or conducting the evaluation” (Cousins, Donohue, & Bloom, 1996, p. 210). O’Sullivan and O’Sullivan (2002) discussed the use of collaborative evaluation when assessing the Sustainable Agricultural Extension (SARE) program. They found that not only the results, but the evaluative process, resulted in program stakeholders looking deeper into the program design and management systems, making adjustments and even revising their timelines based on expectations and ultimately being more successful. Düvel (2002) found that when participants were engaged in group dialogue during a participatory needs assessment process they reflected differently than when responding alone and became more engaged. The findings indicated the user-focused evaluative process, when implemented collectively, assisted in affirming or denying individual beliefs about a program and the group participatory approach held promise in getting users engaged.

Developmental evaluation takes participatory evaluation (or user-focused evaluation) to another level. Patton (2011) introduced developmental evaluation as an approach that breaks from traditional evaluation and challenges program developers, funders and communities to think about the broader system within which

change can occur. In many cases, a developmental evaluation, which is flexible, nimble and can be altered throughout the course of program planning and implementation, is able to identify what a community needs versus what is being done and often indicates where a program should go, even if it is unplanned and unexpected. Patton (2011) stated, a developmental approach to evaluation is often most useful when working in a complex environment where (a) actions are nonlinear and can have many compounding effects on the system, (b) patterns of change emerge without any identifiable reason or source, (c) interactions between players are dynamic and unreliable in terms of level of intensity and amount of regularity, (d) interactions between players lead to adaption of program plans, (e) outcomes cannot be tied to processes, and (f) players coexist and evolve simultaneously. The programmatic description he offered sounds like most international extension programs. While the approach is relatively new, and breaks traditional evaluation boundaries, one would expect quick adoption given it could be extremely valuable in the context of international agricultural and extension work. At this time, not a single article in the *Journal of International and Agricultural Extension Education* mentions the use of developmental evaluation as an evaluative approach.

An Appreciative Inquiry Approach

Whether summative, formative, user-focused or developmental in nature, evaluation is almost always approached with an evaluator or evaluation team providing insight into areas where a program team is performing well resulting in positive change (whether expected or unexpected) and not performing well (identifying areas where a program has not met its intended outcomes). Recommendations for improvement and/or

whether funding should continue are often included in a final evaluation report which focuses on deficits. Human nature drives us to think about what we are not doing well so we can get “better” and an evaluator helps identify areas of weakness, which largely explains why many fear evaluation (or try to avoid it) given future funding is often tied to the results.

The trend of identifying weakness is pervasive throughout the developed world. Traditional performance reviews in the workplace focus on identifying areas for personal improvement, and professional development plans are designed to help us overcome our weaknesses. However, the Gallup Organization introduced the concept that employers should focus on employees’ strengths rather than weaknesses (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999; Buckingham & Clifton, 2001) using a positive psychology approach. Their research over time has shown that focusing on individual employee success ultimately leads to greater organizational success. Luthans (2002) described strengths-based performance reviews as focusing on “catching employees doing something right to reinforce them, rather than catching them doing something wrong to punish them” (p. 14). Which begs the question, why are evaluators always striving to find what is going wrong with a program rather than focusing on what is going right? Why not focus on appreciating the successes of a program, and their intended and unintended consequences, and encourage more of whatever it is the stakeholder appreciates?

Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) stated,

Appreciative inquiry is about the coevolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the relevant world around them. In its broadest focus, it involves systematic discovery of what gives “life” to a

living system when it is most alive, most effective, and most constructively capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. Appreciate inquiry involves, in a central way, the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system’s capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential (p. 3).

Preskill and Catsambas (2006) offer an appreciative inquiry approach to evaluation that focuses on appreciating the strengths of a program rather than its weaknesses and forming programmatic recommendations based on what a program is doing well, rather than on areas where the program team struggles. They define this approach as, a group process that inquiries into, identifies and further develops the best of “what is” in organizations in order to create a better future. Often used in the organization development field as an approach to large-scale change, it is a means for addressing issues, challenges, changes and concerns of an organization in ways that builds on the successful, effective and energizing experiences of its members. Underlying appreciative inquiry is a belief that the questions we ask are critical to the world we create (Preskill & Catsambas 2006 p. 2).

An appreciative inquiry approach to evaluation requires not only the evaluator but the program staff and their stakeholders to shift their mindset. Whether or not the evaluation is formative, summative or developmental in nature it must be user-focused and conducted with stakeholder involvement. A few alterations to questioning routes can result in a refocused, revitalized effort. Table one highlights the difference between evaluative questions that come from a problem-solving approach

against those using an appreciative inquiry approach. The framing of the questions highlight how appreciative inquiry focuses on (a) appreciating the best of what is, (b) imagining what could be, (c) determining what should be, and (d) creating what will be in a collaborative environment (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006).

Table 1
Example evaluation questions using diverse approaches

<i>Problem Solving Approach</i>	<i>Appreciative Inquiry Approach</i>
What are the big problems with this program?	Under what circumstances is

Application to International Extension Education

International extension education is well positioned to capitalize on the strengths-based approach of appreciative inquiry. There are four particular trends that may serve as strong tailwinds towards an appreciative inquiry evaluation movement. First, within many international contexts, extension is less professional, and thus less structured. The environment for appreciative inquiry evaluation is thus unencumbered with previous evaluation history (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006). Second, internationally, particularly when working across cultures and borders, it is critical to establish and maintain a participatory ethos (Patton, 1997). Frequently, there are not extrinsic incentives nor punishments that are easily leveraged. Many extension programs are dependent on volunteers giving of their time and talents. Third, an appreciative inquiry evaluation approach has the opportunity to uncover serendipitous results that are sometimes more valuable than the originally intended output or outcome (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006). Finally, evaluation as a discipline continues to evolve in response to

	this program most effective?
Why have systems and procedures not worked?	What systems and procedures are most effective?
Why are we not getting the results we want?	What possibilities exist that we have not yet considered?
Why has the team been unsuccessful?	When has the team come together and been the most successful?

societal trends and needs. There are no definitive right or wrong approach to evaluating an extension program as long as tenets such as truth, rigor, and participant care are adhered to.

Structural Opportunities

With over 190 countries around the globe there is the potential for more than 190 different conceptualizations of what international extension education looks like, all with differing levels of maturity. With the passing of the Smith Lever act in 1914, the United States’ Cooperative Extension system is one of the oldest and most prominent systems around the globe. However, in concert with the history accumulated in the U. S. system there have also been a number of institutional norms and precedents established. To the contrary, in many countries around the globe, extension systems are relatively new. For example, the extension system in Kenya underwent a country-wide change within the past decade.

The result of major organizational changes provide both challenges and opportunities. One of the key opportunities is the absence of historical, institutional

norms. Many extension systems are leveraging these conditions of creative destruction to build more efficient and effective approaches, tools, and techniques. Within this context appreciative inquiry evaluation may provide an opportunity to employ a very contemporary approach to evaluation.

Participatory Opportunities

In both emerging and established extension systems there are a few universal themes; one being the importance of volunteers. Volunteers fill many structural positions within the extension network; as educators, learners, facilitators, opinion leaders, and advisory board members. Volunteers must be treated differently than an employee of an organization. By their very nature, volunteers give their time, talents, and resources without formal compensation to support an organization or cause. In exchange for these inputs volunteers typically accrue benefits in the form of knowledge but also a sense of belonging, community, and participation. Unlike an employee that receives compensation for their actions, volunteers are typically not motivated by the same incentives. Whereas a paycheck provides a strong extrinsic motive to perform, no such motive exists for a volunteer. Similarly, the fear of losing a job for failing to perform is also a strong motive, yet again the motive does not exist for a volunteer.

However, the intrinsic motives that drive a volunteer to perform are where appreciative inquiry evaluation is particularly well positioned to capitalize. Specifically, appreciative inquiry focuses on what is going well, and where strengths exist. These findings are aligned and attuned to intrinsic motivations, with the results reinforcing positive experiences and commitment. Intrinsic motivation activation and reinforcement have been described as

inspirational motivation, which has in turn been found to lead to higher levels of follower commitment and performance.

Identification of Unintended Outcomes

An appreciative inquiry evaluation approach is particularly well suited to international extension contexts where limited resources may necessitate novel and create problem-solving approaches that result in the identification of unintended outcomes and impacts. Although extension programs generally adhere to a basic plan, or logic model, to define the anticipated inputs, processes, and outputs of programs, appreciative inquiry evaluation provides a space for identifying where there may be opportunities for additional investment at any stage within the process. Without a constrained view of programs as static and deterministic, appreciative inquiry can examine what is going well with a program and assist it in changing course to ultimately have the strongest impact, even if it is different from the one originally intended. From this perspective, appreciative inquiry provides a better understanding of context and what might be, rather than what was.

Conclusions

One of the great challenges of theory-driven and empirical science is the need to find an appropriate balance between literature and innovation. Generally, maturity and accrued history result in diminished appetite for innovation and risk-taking. Evaluation as a discipline, has continued to evolve over the past several decades in alignment with societal shifts and trends. However, within international extension education, the evaluation process itself is rarely viewed as an outcome variable of interest. Rather it is a means to an end; or an approach to determine and articulate programmatic outcomes, impacts and value.

As educators around the world consider being strengths-based in their approach to program development, and even in their approaches to employee and volunteer performance reviews, appreciative inquiry evaluation is well positioned to assist. If we process the question, as a discipline, *Is it time to think about new ways to evaluate international extension programs?* we need to consider what may happen if we do not engage in innovative approaches such as this one. While a program team, and their stakeholders, must be educated and prepared to embark on an innovative approach such as this one, the value in focusing on the good resulting from extension programs, putting resources in place to support the most positive aspects of what is being done, and then seeing how far a program can go in reaching its intended and unintended outcomes could truly impact the world.

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