

Shaping Outcomes: A Collaborative Museum-Library Project for Outcomes-based Professional Development

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Introduction

“Shaping Outcomes” is a web-based, instructor-mediated learning experience designed to spread awareness about and develop competence in outcomes-based planning and evaluation (OBPE). A team of library science and museum studies faculty developed the program, with English, education, and instructional design faculty and staff participation, on contract to the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). The tutorial includes screen instruction, interactive elements and collaborative exercises, and a range of library and museum case studies.

IMLS and other funding agencies are deeply committed to the concept of outcomes evaluation of their funded projects. In an outcomes-oriented approach, planning begins with the identification of an audience’s need, and the development of a library or museum program to address that need. The focus is relentlessly audience-centered, and the planning process culminates in the articulation of concrete, measurable indicators that determine whether the program has successfully helped its audience achieve the needed goals. At the end of this paper, an outline of the OBPE logic model, laying out these steps, is provided.

An outcomes approach can present a challenge to both museum and library professionals, who often have a “build it and they will come” attitude—sometimes expressed as “if they come, then fine.” This orientation looks at web hits, circulations, and program attendance as measures of success. OBPE instead asks, “what change will the program make in audience members?” Will they feel different? know something different? be able to do something different? be something different as a result of the project? Difference in people’s lives, not a mechanical counting of library “uses” (outputs), is the goal.

Background

The Institute for Museum and Library Services has two main funding mechanisms. Through state agencies, it provides Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) funds. It also directly funds grants for specific initiatives in the museum and library worlds, such as to recruit librarians, to develop institutional capacities especially in digitization, and to promote collaborative work.

For several years, IMLS has required recipients of its direct grants to attend a two-day in-person work-

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shop in Washington, D.C. Led by a contracted instructor, the workshop conveys the ideas and practices of an outcomes-based approach to project planning, called Outcomes-Based Planning and Evaluation or OBPE.

All grant applications would have included an evaluation section. Under current guidelines, this evaluation aspect comprises approximately 10 percent of the overall score given to each grant proposal. This evaluation section might or might not have been expressed in a concrete, audience-focused, and outcomes-based format. Therefore, the participants in the in-person workshop might or might not have taken an outcomes-based approach towards program evaluation. The workshop equipped them with the tools to reexamine this issue, and to incorporate an outcomes orientation into their interim and final grant reports.

There were two major drawbacks to this approach: timing, and the limited audience.

The OBPE philosophy says that evaluation should be a part of planning, not just making a sudden appearance in final reports. Program planners—and thus grant applicants—should be thinking about incorporating effective evaluation into their early brainstorming through to completed designs. The point at which a project has been designed to the specificity required for a successful grant application is rather too late to create or even substantially revise the evaluation plan.

The second drawback was the necessarily limited audience. However generous IMLS is, its direct grants can reach only so many recipients. Small organizations interested in funding from LSTA or charitable foundations would benefit from knowledge of OBPE, but could not be reached in this format.

There were two other existing alternatives. Many recipients of IMLS grants have given local presentations on the concept, including effective and impressive online resources.¹ IMLS on its website offered various tutorials and tools.² The presentations could be specific and locally effective, but they did not have a national scope. The IMLS tools were passive, with no way of verifying how users understood or employed them.

The answer to these limitations was the development of an online, instructor-mediated tutorial, the Shaping Outcomes course. Online, it would not be geographically limited and would present far fewer logistical (and thus cost) issues; with instructor-mediation participant learning could be closely developed, encouraged, and evaluated.

Development

The Shaping Outcomes course project was a collaborative, evaluation-driven effort carried out at a collaborative, evaluation-focused institution. Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis is a campus that consists of a collection of schools sponsored by/belonging to either the Indiana University system or the Purdue University system. The Museum Studies Program is a part of the Indiana University-based School of Liberal Arts. The School of Library and Information Science in Indianapolis (SLIS-Indy) is one of two campuses of one ALA-accredited library school; the other campus is in Bloomington at the main Indiana University site. The SLIS-Indy campus manages Web and interactive-TV library coursework for students throughout the state. The IUPUI campus administration includes a strong planning and institutional improvement office, evaluation experts, instructional design assistance, and a testing center. All of these elements contributed to the project.

There were three content developers: the principal investigator, Dr. Elizabeth Kryder-Reid, head of the Museum Studies Program, a library school faculty member, Dr. Rachel Applegate, and an English professor, Dr. Helen Schwartz, an expert in web teaching and technical writing. They attended the in-person workshop and used the IMLS web tools. Dr. Schwartz provided the main script, and exercised overall editorial control for input from the other members. A noted technological expert on the library school faculty, Dr. Annette Lamb, created the Web-based modules which presented the text and interactive features.

Several other campus assets also became part of the project. A visual design faculty member from the Heron School of Art reviewed and revised the initial basic design. An instructional evaluation consultant reviewed proposed exercises, tests and rubrics. Course activities were handled through the open-source class management software OnCourse (although that aspect was much less successful than the others). Finally, the online tutorial was piloted using Library Science and Museum Science courses. Library students were all at the masters level; the museum courses included undergraduates.

One of the most important content issues was the development of “case studies.” These were intended as illustrative examples of the complete use of an OBPE “logic model” approach to program planning. An array of cases was developed to illuminate museum and library settings and describing both large and small programs. As one purpose of the project was to move the

OBPE concept into wider use, for internally funded as well as major-grant projects, it was important to show its utility in institutions of various sizes. For the final course version, library cases ranged from an elementary school's poetry slam to a state-wide multi-institutional health information initiative, museum cases from a fire-fighting kiosk for children to biodiversity education for teachers.

Outcomes and Evaluation Thereof

A project to create a course in evaluation should be exemplary in its own internal evaluative processes. In fact, evaluation of the course went beyond the confines of the OBPE logic model format, which focuses mainly on summative (end) results in terms of participant outcomes. For the Shaping Outcomes project, a formative approach was invaluable to ensure that the project developed in the desired way, before one could then evaluate whether it created the desired outcomes.

Formative assessment used several methods: benchmarking/expert evaluation, naïve tester feedback through interviews and focus groups, and surveys of pilot offering participants.

Expert evaluation was carried out by people with backgrounds in education, online teaching, visual communications, and libraries and museums. A steering committee consisting of museum and library administrators, and museum and library educators, reviewed the materials and pedagogical techniques.

Testers were recruited to review the developing course modules, provide instant verbal feedback (less extensive than full 'protocol analysis') and also to fill out comment forms organized around design challenges such as navigability, layout, and conceptual clarity.

Students in pilot offerings, both stand-alone and embedded within existing library science/museum studies courses, were surveyed extensively. They were asked about clarity, user-friendliness, and other design issues for all five instructional modules and also for the course management aspects such as instructor feedback and class or group discussions. Interviews and focus groups, conducted by neutral campus Testing Center personnel, gathered more in-depth observations.

Summative assessment of participant outcomes developed alongside the course itself. Two levels were targeted, cognitive and skills. For a cognitive assessment of whether students had learned the overall components, terminology and concepts of OBPE, a pre- and post-

test was used. For the skills assessment, each student (or group) worked on developing his/her/their own logic model. A consistent scoring rubric allowed instructors to determine if a completed logic model was deficient, passing, or exemplary.

Almost all participants who have completed the course have produced acceptable logic models and have demonstrated knowledge of the concepts through testing.

Dissemination Challenges

No less than with other library programs, a simple "build it and wait for them to come" approach is not effective in reaching the goals of the Shaping Outcomes project. In 2006–2007, its third year, the offering of the course has taken two main forms and is in the process of wrestling with continuing issues.

The two main forms are embedded and stand-alone. In an embedded presentation, the tutorial becomes part of a museum studies course or a library science course. For example, students in a library school evaluation course take imaginary projects through the tutorial and learn to apply evaluative techniques (taught earlier in the class) within the Shaping Outcomes logic model format. In a research methods course, students learn about evaluative research and practice designing evaluative structures for program evaluation, incorporating the logic model design.

For the stand-alone version, librarians (and museum personnel) have been solicited from a wide variety of institutions. In some cases they may work as teams, and can work on existing project ideas. In others, they may be the one individual at their institution who is the point-person for planning, evaluation, and grant applications.

Stand-alone offerings have presented two particularly difficult challenges. The first is technological. Enrolled university students already have a familiarity with existing course management software. While it is safe to say that all librarians have Web access, they may have older equipment and slower connections, and very often have not been familiar with discussion, chat, and other communications methods commonly used to enhance a web tutorial. It does not help that the OnCourse site management software is not very user-friendly, and that Indiana University authentication systems are difficult to keep up to date for non-enrolled persons.

The second is commitment and retention, or retention via commitment. Online courses in general have

faced problems with student retention. Unfortunately, most of the research on this issue has been done in very dissimilar situations, such as community colleges, or universities which offer in-person and online versions of the same course. Or, online courses may be mandatory for a particular program.

In the Shaping Outcomes development phase, participants were not charged anything for their participation—they made no monetary investment. It became apparent that many faced competition for their time investments. Professional development for most librarians is a matter of a philosophical commitment by institution and individual, not a requirement for licensure nor something that would be directly rewarded by a promotion or raise. Whether these are the reasons, or because of technological problems with the course management software, drop-out rates have been high for the stand-alone courses.

As the project goes forward, the Shaping Outcomes team must successfully advertise and market the course as an effective method of acquiring valuable skills. This entails convincing librarians that the skills are valuable, and that the methods used in the course are effective. Thanks to the evaluative processes built in (as OBPE requires) to the project as a whole, the Shaping Outcomes team can speak with evidence-based confidence on the issue of effectiveness.

That OBPE is a valuable skill will require communication to the widest librarian audience possible. Librarians in academia already face a call for assessment and accountability in higher education. Grant funders—IMLS but also organizations like the United Way and the Kellogg Foundation—often want to know exactly what their dollars have achieved. OBPE/Shaping Outcomes is a valuable tool in that environment.

OBPE Logic Model

With the use of a logic model, all participants in a project understand the basic elements of what being done, and why.

Program Title, Leader and Partners

Program Context

Stakeholders: those who care about the program and its outcomes.

Audience(s): those who can benefit from the program.

Audience needs: what the audience lacks or can make use of.

Audience considerations: characteristics of the audience that affect program design.

Solution: the program itself.

Results: what the program should produce for the audience.

Program purpose statement

We do what?

For whom?

For what outcome?

Program elements

Inputs

Activities (internal management)

Services (what the participants experience)

Outputs

Outcome statements

Outcome

Indicator

Applied to

Data Source

Timing

Target

Notes

1. See, for example, Simple Logic Model: Taylor-Powell, Ellen (1996). Logic models to enhance program performance. Retrieved September 11, 2005 from University of Wisconsin-Extension, Program Development and Evaluation Unit Web Site <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/pdande/evaluation/powerpt/LMpresentation.ppt#9>.

2. For example, National Leadership Grant tutorial by the Institute of Museum and Library Services found at: http://www.imls.gov/Project_Planning/index.asp.