USING WEB-BASED TECHNOLOGIES TO INCREASE EVALUATION CAPACITY IN ORGANIZATIONS PROVIDING CHILD AND YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

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Abstract: Given today’s climate of economic uncertainty and fiscal restraint, organizations providing child and youth mental health services are required to do so with limited resources. Within this context, service providers face added pressure to deliver evidence-based programs and demonstrate program effectiveness. The Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health works with organizations to meet these demands by building capacity in program evaluation. While personal instruction and mentoring are important ways of providing support, face-to-face consultations are not always cost-effective. In this article we describe the use of interactive technology and computer-based learning as an alternative and/or complementary (to face-to-face) means of delivering evaluation information and training. We discuss the process of developing these tools and share findings from our preliminary evaluation of their effectiveness in enhancing the evaluation-related supports we offer to providers of child and youth mental health services.

Résumé: Étant donné le climat actuel d’incertitude économique et de restriction budgétaire, les organismes offrant des services en santé mentale aux enfants et aux adolescents doivent s’acquitter de...
In today’s climate of economic uncertainty and fiscal restraint, organizations providing child and youth mental health services are working hard to meet the complex needs of children, youth, and their families, and in doing so face two inter-related pressures: (a) to be accountable to funders by demonstrating program effectiveness, and (b) to implement and evaluate evidence-based or “best” practices. At The Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health (formerly the Provincial Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health at CHEO, referred to throughout this article as “the Centre”), we work with organizations to build capacity in planning, doing, and using evaluation to meet these demands. While personal connections and individual instruction are a critical part of providing this support, we recognize that face-to-face consultations can be limited (e.g., they may not always be cost-effective, some users may prefer more independent approaches to learning, and the knowledge shared may not be sustainable beyond the interaction). Increasingly, interactive technology and computer-based learning are becoming popular “alternative” ways of delivering information and training (e.g., Cooner & Hickman, 2008; Quinney, Hutchings, & Scammell, 2008). In order to enhance the evaluation-related supports provided through the Centre, we have looked to Web-based technologies to complement our face-to-face interactions with clients.

In this paper, we discuss our blended learning approach by describing how we pair our consultation services with Web-based tools for learning. We begin with an overview of our approach and activities at the
Centre, with specific reference to the way we work towards enhancing evaluation capacity in child and youth mental health service agencies. We then offer a brief review of the literature related to Web-based tools for learning, and follow this with a description of the development and use of two Web-based resources: an online program evaluation learning tool and a series of webinars focused on a range of evaluation-related topics. We then share findings from our preliminary evaluations of these interventions and our early reflections on the successes and challenges of implementing this approach. We conclude by discussing how using Web-based learning resources together with face-to-face consultations offers a number of advantages and can therefore be used as an innovative way to engage child and youth mental health agencies with limited evaluation capacity and resources.

**THE ONTARIO CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE FOR CHILD AND YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH: AN OVERVIEW OF OUR APPROACH AND ACTIVITIES**

The field of child and youth mental health continues to be under-resourced and over-burdened. Child and youth mental health organizations are struggling with a general lack of resources and long wait-lists for service, while also facing pressure to implement evidence-based practices and demonstrate program effectiveness to ensure accountability to the public and funders (Barwick et al., 2008; Boydell, Stasiulis, Barwick, Greenberg, & Pong, 2008). Increasingly, agencies are recognizing the value of program evaluation as a mechanism for leveraging additional funding as well as strengthening programs and services. Engaging in program evaluation activities, however, remains a challenge for many organizations. Agencies regularly confront a number of tangible (e.g., lack of funding) and intangible barriers (e.g., in-kind time, experience with program monitoring) to carrying out evaluation as a key part of their service delivery. Clinical service provision is understandably prioritized in decisions about how funds are allocated, and the cost of hiring an external evaluator to conduct an evaluation is often seen as prohibitive.

In response, the Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health has developed an innovative approach to meet the evaluation needs of child and youth mental health agencies across Ontario. Funded by the Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS), the Centre has been in operation since 2004 with the mission of bringing people and knowledge together to promote the uptake and evaluation of evidence-informed practices in child and youth mental
The Centre’s approach to program evaluation is to increase agencies’ capacity to plan, do, and use evaluation through ongoing support, education, training, and funding.

The Centre provides free consultation services, toolkits, and workshops to child and youth mental health service organizations to accomplish these strategic goals. Consultants with extensive experience and specialized training in evaluation and research travel across Ontario to these organizations to conduct initial face-to-face consultations, and ongoing support is facilitated through teleconferencing and/or videoconferencing when required. As well, the Centre has developed a series of resources on program evaluation, developing partnerships, knowledge exchange, and methods used in evaluation and research (e.g., focus groups, interviews, surveys, arts-based approaches to collecting data). These resources are free, publicly available (at <www.excellenceforchildandyouth.ca>), and designed to support organizations’ knowledge uptake, skills enhancement and capacity-building. In addition, the Centre offers in-person training and workshops to agency staff on a range of evaluation-related topics (e.g., introduction to evaluation, using appreciative inquiry in evaluation) at professional development events and conferences.

With an annual operating budget of $5.9 million, the Centre provides a number of grants and awards to organizations and individuals working in the area of child and youth mental health. Over the last two fiscal years, 20% of this budget has been specifically directed towards supporting program evaluation activities in these organizations. Recognizing the varying needs of organizations, the Centre offers two awards: the Evaluation Capacity-Building Grant (ECBG) and the Evaluation Implementation Grant (EIG). The ECBG provides up to $10,000 over a seven-month period to an organization to support the development of an evaluation framework with a comprehensive program logic model. This grant is aimed at organizations that are in the initial stages of developing skills and knowledge related to program evaluation to assist in laying the groundwork for an evaluation project. The EIG provides up to $30,000 over a 12-month period to an organization to carry out an evaluation project. This award is typically aimed at agencies that have prior experience in evaluation to assist them in implementing their feasible and appropriate evaluation plans.

At all stages of funding, the Centre encourages agency capacity-building in program evaluation. Within the context of program evaluation,
capacity building has been defined as “intentional work to continuously create and sustain overall organizational processes that make quality evaluation and its uses routine” (Baizerman, Compton, & Stockdill, 2002, p. 14). This involves improving the ability of organizations to conduct appropriate, sustainable, and quality evaluations and to use evaluation findings to shift practice (Cousins, Goh, & Clark, 2005; Preskill & Boyle, 2008; Stockdill, Baizerman, & Compton, 2002). In addition to increasing training for staff involved in evaluation, capacity is enhanced when institutional or organizational support exists (Malik & Roth, 2000). In fact, an organizational culture that values evaluation, promotes a group approach to learning, and reflects a strong staff commitment to service improvement must precede the development of evaluation-related skills (Garvin, 1993; Mink, 1992; Pedler, 1995). Such “learning organizations” are characterized by a culture of inquiry that engages evaluation and contributes to the sustainability of evaluation practice (Preskill & Boyle, 2008).

Efforts to support evaluation capacity-building in child and youth mental health agencies can be effective in enhancing skills in planning, doing, and using evaluation, yet they remain limited in important ways. First, a finite amount of funds available for distribution means that monies are allocated based on how well a proposal is conceptualized and written. Groups that are most in need of support are also likely to be those with limited skill in proposal writing, which disadvantages them in competitions for such awards. Second, while face-to-face consultations can be very helpful in providing guidance and advice on developing and implementing an evaluation plan, such visits are time limited and are not always cost-effective, particularly given the distance and expense involved in travelling to rural and remote communities. Third, the use of different tools to support learning depends upon the extent to which these resources are engaging and accessible and requires a motivated style of learning that may not be universal. Fourth, workshops and presentations on evaluation-related topics can be costly to deliver and difficult to schedule given the day-to-day service requirements of practitioners. Finally, simply providing funds, consultation services, and tools may not contribute to the creation of a culture of evaluation.

Given these limitations, the Centre has continued to look for innovative ways to meet the evaluation needs of child and youth mental health agencies. Most recently, interactive Web-based technologies have been used to complement the supports described above, in order to build and enhance evaluation capacity in these organizations. This
is a strategic way of delivering evaluation information and training to a wide audience that can complement the provision of evaluation grants, face-to-face consultations, and existing tools and resources. In addition to expanding the range of modalities through which to offer training and support, interactive technologies and Web-based learning can enhance organizations’ interest and motivation around evaluation, accommodate agencies’ needs for cost-effective and accessible information that is readily available and be provided to those with a range of learning styles.

WEB-BASED TOOLS FOR LEARNING: CURRENT OPPORTUNITIES AND TRENDS

Interactive technology and computer-based learning are increasingly becoming popular vehicles for delivering skills-based training and information, particularly to adult learners (e.g., Cooner & Hickman, 2008; Quinney et al., 2008). Web-based tools for learning are an attractive alternative to traditional teaching models for a number of reasons. A primary barrier to participating in high quality training and educational opportunities relates to access. Given the high demands of clinical service provision, practitioners in child and youth mental health are often limited in terms of time and ease of accessibility to resources. Traveling to a workshop or other learning event may not be practical, given the number of hours spent in direct service. This is particularly true for those working in rural or other communities that are isolated geographically from the large urban centres where these events are typically held. The self-directed, individually-paced style of learning associated with Web-based resources (Andrusyszyn, Cragg, & Humbert, 2001), along with the fact that these tools can be accessed anytime and anywhere can help to build skills and potentially create a network of learners that would not otherwise come together for professional development opportunities (Ives & Aitken, 2008).

A related advantage of using Web-based tools for learning is that tapping into this technology can be an effective use of funds. For organizations, information sharing can occur among several staff persons, as a number of users in a particular setting can access the information at any one time. Cost-effectiveness is not only valuable from an agency perspective, but also from the Centre’s perspective. Our team of consultants works with agencies that are widely dispersed across the province, in cities as well as in rural and isolated communities. While in-person consultations are a critical part of the services that
we provide, by necessity they must be limited to minimize costs. The availability of Web-based tools allows for learning opportunities to extend beyond a single site visit and can “provide another avenue to meet the needs of an educationally and geographically diverse population” (Pullen, 2006, p. 232) in a cost-effective way.

Finally, online learning resources can contribute to and solidify skill development related to evaluation because of the unique learning opportunities presented by this method of knowledge delivery. Introducing information via Web-based tools can contribute to mastering basic operating skills (Tse, Choi, & Leung, 2008) for those with little experience and/or minimal comfort with using computer technology. As well, the use of online resources supports an active learning process since users are provided with opportunities to visualize information and engage in critical thinking in ways that have been proven to enhance understanding. Examples include hands-on activities and case studies that link concepts to practitioners’ everyday practices (Ali, Hodson-Carlton, & Ryan, 2004; Belcher & Vonderhaar, 2005; Kozłowski, 2002; Moallem, 2001; Twibell, Ryan, & Hermiz, 2005).

Despite these advantages, Web-based tools have limitations. For example, discomfort with technology, lack of motivation, and technical problems (Rivera & Rice, 2002) can cause frustration and feelings of isolation among users (Hara & Kling, 2000), thus interfering with learning. As well, if tools are only offered using a one-size-fits-all approach, they may prove to be ineffective. Resources are known to be maximally effective when they are available in a number of languages and modalities and can therefore meet the range of learning needs present in diverse populations (Ives & Aitken, 2008). Finally, studies on the effectiveness of online learning have had mixed results in terms of positive and sustained learning outcomes, and empirical evidence to support or refute the effectiveness of such technologies is lacking (Kim & Bonk, 2006).

Such resources, then, may not work best when used as stand-alone tools. However, there is considerable support for using these resources as a complement to other forms of learning (e.g., face-to-face meetings, video/teleconferencing). While online learning can be an effective way of enriching the learning experience and supporting differentiated learning strategies through “anytime, anywhere” access to instruction (Kierman & Alter, 2004), periodic meetings with the instructor help to enrich the content and facilitate understanding. In other words, Web-based technologies can best be used to support the acquisition of evaluation-related skills but work most effectively as a complement
to other forms of learning, rather than a replacement of these forms of teaching (Cooner & Hickman, 2008).

The Centre’s approach to building evaluation skills and capacity in child and youth mental health organizations is to use a “blended learning design” (Valiathan, 2002). This involves relying on several complementary modes of instruction, including personal instruction, toolkits, workshops, and most recently, Web-based technologies. Two such resources are described in the next section.

USING WEB-BASED TOOLS AT THE CENTRE: TWO EXAMPLES

Online Learning Modules

An online learning tool that would communicate how to plan, do, and use evaluation was developed by the Centre’s Evaluation and Research Team as a way of offering innovative, cost-effective program evaluation support to organizations providing child and youth mental health services. This idea was presented to our Service Providers Reference Group, one of the Centre’s key advisory committees, comprised entirely of frontline service providers working in the area of child and youth mental health. The group provided positive feedback and also cautioned that this resource should not replace face-to-face training and consultations offered by Centre consultants.

These Online Learning Modules (OLMs) focus on three separate, yet related, phases of planning, doing, and using evaluation and can be found at <www.centrelearning.ca>. The goal of the OLMs is to provide child and youth mental health service organizations across Ontario with a series of introductory “courses” in evaluation aimed at (a) enhancing their overall and practical understanding of evaluation and its related concepts, and (b) building knowledge and skill in evaluation-related activities (e.g., various aspects related to process and outcome evaluation, knowledge of different methodological options, and an understanding of stakeholder engagement and group facilitation). The content of the modules was developed over a period of several months by members of our team, in consultation with an independent evaluation firm in the Ottawa area. A local instructional design firm with expertise in developing e-learning tools was contracted to develop the storyboards to support the content. The OLMs were disseminated through the Centre’s Web site to child and youth mental health service providers with varying degrees of experience in evaluation. The average length of time it takes for an individual or group to complete the three modules is
three hours. By engaging with the modules, the hope was that users learn how to:

1. Identify and describe the steps and tasks associated with planning an evaluation project,
2. Describe key evaluation concepts and apply these to their particular settings,
3. Conduct an evaluation project,
4. Use evaluation findings to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of their programs, and
5. Identify resources to build further capacity in evaluation.

Module 1 (“Planning”) is designed to help participants learn how to lay the groundwork for an evaluation project. General definitions (including “program evaluation,” “process,” and “outcome”) and the benefits of evaluation along with potential challenges (and possible ways of addressing these) are included. This module contains important information about how to prepare for an evaluation by developing an evaluation framework (i.e., a logic model, indicators and measures, identifying evaluation questions and methods for data collection). Module 2 (“Doing”) is focused on guiding the actual work related to evaluation (e.g., implementing different methods to collect information and analysing data). The focus of Module 3 (“Using”) is to help participants understand how to write a comprehensive final report and identify strategies for using evaluation findings to strengthen services. All three modules contain a glossary of evaluation terms and a list of additional resources to consult for more information on evaluation.

As described above, a particular strength of a Web-based resource is its focus on enhancing active learning. This includes opportunities to work through hands-on activities, case studies, and other features that can help users to connect the material to their real-life practice. The format of the OLMs supports active learning in a number of ways, including engaging participants in scenarios to practice skills, testing knowledge acquisition through quizzes located at the end of each module, and encouraging users to seek out additional information by clicking on icons entitled “Something to think about” or “For your information.” As well, Ali, Hodson-Carlton, and Ryan (2004) argue that Web-based learning tools are most useful when complemented with opportunities to engage with others and process information socially in a group setting. In using these tools, participants are encouraged to view the modules with colleagues and other interested parties and to work through the exercises in groups.
A second vehicle for Web-based learning recently launched by the Centre is a series of webinars. Webinars are live, interactive, and Web-based seminars that facilitate knowledge acquisition and sharing for up to 20 or so participating organizations. In order to take part, users must have access to a working computer, Internet access, and a phone line. Registrants are able to view a presentation and interact online via the Web and are able to listen to the presentation and contribute to discussion via teleconference. This resource does not require travel, is facilitated by the use of customary office equipment, is offered for free to agencies, and provides an opportunity for open discussion among participants and webinar facilitators. This helps to alleviate the geographic, technological, and financial barriers that can prevent organizations from participating in educational instruction and interacting with one another in real time.

The Centre’s Evaluation and Research Team designed a pilot series of webinars to support child and youth mental health organizations to plan and implement program evaluation activities. Our objective was to increase the dissemination and uptake of evaluation-related knowledge among child and youth mental health agencies, and to evaluate the extent to which this goal was reached. Our intent was to complement and enhance the Centre’s consultation services by presenting information in an innovative and interactive format wherein agencies could share knowledge with other groups at a similar stage of evaluation capacity.

After exploring the feasibility and relative advantages of this approach, we delivered our first webinar in the fall of 2008, which focused on how to conduct and present a literature review within the context of an evaluation project. We adjusted our process based on feedback from participants and went on to offer four additional pilot webinars over the following six months. These focused on selecting measures, conducting a process evaluation, and how to write a final report and winning proposal. The target audience for these initial Web-based educational seminars was agencies who had received Evaluation Capacity Building Grants (ECBGs) and were in the process of developing their evaluation frameworks. Topics and presentation dates were matched with the requirements and expected stage of learning during this seven-month grant. While the first topic idea was generated internally, subsequent topics were developed based on feedback from target participants. Each webinar was intended to support funded organizations in completing the main deliverable
associated with the grant (i.e., an evaluation framework), while at the same time enhancing the agency’s internal capacity for engaging in evaluation-related activities.

These webinars provided participants with the unique opportunity to engage with Centre consultants as well as with one another in a live forum focused on topics related to their program evaluation projects. Participants received an invitation in advance of the webinar outlining the topic and associated learning objectives. During the live discussion, participants were encouraged to ask questions, provide feedback, and converse with one another. In order to continue to provide support to agencies, participants were given copies of the slide presentation and supplementary materials after the webinar. Recordings of the live webinars were also made available for free download on the Centre’s Web site (<www.onthepoint.ca>) to accommodate multiple viewings at any time, as well as their ongoing use by other agencies.

EVALUATION FINDINGS

Preliminary evaluations from pilot stages of both the online learning modules and the webinars are encouraging. Given that these educational tools are still in the early stages of development and dissemination, our evaluations have been formative, and focused on factors relating to the development and implementation of these Web-based technologies. Specifically, participants were asked to comment on (a) the format and content of the tools, (b) the extent to which these resources contributed to skill development in evaluation, and (c) the usefulness of the technology. Below, we present quantitative and qualitative findings together, focusing on common themes about the format, process, quality, and contributions of both OLMs and webinars to evaluation capacity-building: (a) access and cost-effectiveness, (b) Web-based tools as providing a unique learning opportunity, (c) Web-based resources as effective complements to other learning strategies, and (d) limitations and areas for growth.

Methods Used

Online learning modules

Six child and youth mental health practitioners (recruited through the Evaluation and Research team’s network) were invited to participate in a “pilot” of the OLMs. These users’ experiences with
OLMs were assessed through a satisfaction survey, in which they responded to a number of open and closed-ended questions focused on the look and feel of the modules, the interactive capabilities of the tool, and the extent to which the content contributed to skill development. To ensure anonymity and increase response rates, these surveys were completed online, and the responses were aggregated by the Centre’s Information Technology specialist. In order to explore the issues raised, these individuals were also invited to take part in a focus-group interview, which was facilitated by two Centre consultants. The discussion was focused primarily on users’ impressions of the effectiveness of Web-based learning for building capacity in evaluation, the level of uptake of Web-based resources within their respective organizations, and finally their overall satisfaction with the tool. All six pilot participants took part in this focus group, and were assured that their responses would be kept anonymous.

Webinars

To date, our evaluation of the webinars has been based on findings from a feedback survey that was sent to all webinar participants at the end of each session. Each webinar has been attended by between 9–28 practitioners for a total of 106 attendees. In total, feedback was received from 58.5% of participants who completed the surveys. Again, both open and closed-ended questions were posed based on the format of the webinar, aspects relating to participation in the webinar, the quality of information provided, the level of interactivity, and general thoughts related to the usefulness of this medium in contributing to evaluation capacity-building.

Access and Cost-effectiveness

In our collective experience in providing evaluation consultations to frontline service providers in child and youth mental health, we are often met with at least some resistance, as research and evaluation-related information is often described by clinicians as “too specialized” and/or “inaccessible.” With the introduction of the Centre’s Web-based learning resources, evaluation-focused material is presented in a straightforward, accessible way and is supplemented with numerous examples and interactive activities designed to solidify learning. One participant, who has extensive experience with evaluation, shares: “The OLM helped me to learn a new language with which to communicate with others ... that aren’t so research-oriented.”
As described earlier, a major barrier to accessing learning opportunities in the province of Ontario is the distance required to travel and therefore the time lost to the actual provision of services. This is complicated by the number of communities that are isolated and only accessible by plane, or due to weather-related concerns, are difficult to drive to during the winter months. Creating tools that can be accessed through the Internet provides opportunities for those who would not have been able to access them in person. According to several participants: “I like to be able to attend conferences from my desk!”; “(Webinars are a) great way (to attend a) presentation—especially with the winter coming!”; and “Not having to travel was very useful; we (saved) time, money, gas and (prevented) pollution.”

The use of Web-based tools also increases access by creating opportunities for more than a single practitioner to attend a learning session. As long as staff members have access to a computer with Internet capabilities, all individuals interested in using these resources are able to do so. There is also a significant cost savings when the same product or resource can be used multiple times with multiple users, since savings are generated through efficiency.

(This—webinar) is a great idea. There are 60 staff members in this organization. (Although) the evaluation coordinator has access to lots of opportunities to learn about evaluation, other staff don’t have this ability … Everyone has access to internet and computers, so this wouldn’t be a barrier (to learning).

In addition to increasing access and saving money, the use of Web-based resources helps to conserve another critical resource: time. Providers of child and youth mental health services are pressed for time with their busy clinical schedules. Therefore, the time they are able to invest in increasing skills related to research must be used efficiently. Feedback from users suggests that they appreciate the concise and accessible format of the OLMs and webinars: “People are very busy—(the online learning module) can be used in a way that decreases a bit of the burden on our time.”

Clearly, from the agencies’ perspective, increasing access works to save money and time and is an efficient use of resources, particularly in these times of fiscal restraint.
Web-based Tools as Providing Unique Learning Opportunities

Over 80% of users of OLMs shared that the material presented in the resource was very useful and that the look and feel of the tool was engaging. The Web-based format allowed for various layers of information to be presented in an innovative way, fostering a deeper understanding of the material, with interactive examples that helped to solidify learning. It is clear that these innovative techniques were effective in communicating evaluation-related information, given the 87% average increase in level of knowledge reported by users, after having completed only the first module. Participants shared that the OLMs made the learning more accessible and fun, citing the visual interface, extra resources, and quizzes as key contributors to this experience: “(I) liked the quizzes at the end to ensure that learning was solidified . . . It’s a lot better than having a stack of paper to go through”; “I really liked additional resources to click on, (and) liked being able to save them and print them off. (This was helpful for visualizing what these things would look like”; and “I experience this as a very engaging, fun (resource) that we could use.”

Similarly, users of the webinars felt that the material was visually appealing, and allowed for easy access to other Web-based tools referenced in these presentations. Perhaps the most unique aspect of the webinar, however, was users’ ability to share and learn about each others’ experiences in evaluation in a way that was previously only possible by attending presentations in person: “The webinar is such an efficient way to learn and (to) be connected with other colleagues in our field.”

Clearly, concrete examples or lessons learned from others who have “been there” are critical in solidifying evaluation-related learning.

Web-based Tools as Effective Complements to Other Methods of Teaching

While respondents typically found both OLMs and webinars to be understandable and contributed to their knowledge in evaluation, many users felt that these tools would be most effective when used in combination with other teaching methods. Specifically, supplementing these resources with ongoing consultations and/or face-to-face learning opportunities is critical for helping users to apply and consolidate the knowledge: “Newer staff (members) are really comfortable with e-learning, but you get the sense that people really need the face-to-face to solidify learning. If you can have opportunities to have that
face-to-face contact, a mentor to support e-learning, this would be helpful”; and “I still wonder then about the extent to which someone learns and then implements it. Ongoing consultation and perhaps a course would be necessary to solidify their learning.”

Web-based resources, then, should not be used as stand-alone tools, but rather should be seen as one important element in a range of tools and strategies for building evaluation capacity in child and youth mental health service organizations. The Centre’s blended approach to learning, in which a number of approaches and tools are used to engage frontline practitioners, and provide instruction to build skills in evaluation and research appears to be an effective way of meeting this critical need in the field.

Limitations and Areas for Growth

Participants also shared some of the limitations or barriers associated with using Web-based technology to facilitate learning in evaluation. The two issues identified most often by participants were a lack of comfort with the Web-based platform used for these tools and, more generally, the technical challenges encountered when attempting to make use of these resources.

First, users often raised the issue of a general lack of computer literacy and/or a dislike of computers among their staff complement. For many frontline practitioners who deal directly with the mental health needs of children, youth and families, most of their time is spent in clinical service and much less is spent working at a computer. There are thus varying levels of comfort and experience with computer technology in general, which can impact the success of an online learning tool: “In certain organizations (e.g., residential settings) it would be difficult to get staff off the ground and on to the computers”; and “Not everyone tends towards the computer side of things. Many social workers tend towards the ‘people’ side of things. The latter prefer a classroom style of learning, but e-learning is really useful for younger staff.”

Second, participants cited technical problems as a major barrier to using these online tools, particularly when accessing the webinars. While this may be because the technology is new and the systems are not yet perfected, most of the technical issues discussed were related to sound interference related to human error such as leaving cell phones on or presenters speaking too quietly. For these individuals, the time and energy required to resolve these issues was simply not
worth the effort. Having an information technology specialist on staff at the Centre has been essential in dealing efficiently with these challenges, and respondents have increasingly expressed appreciation at having had these issues resolved quickly.

Finally, a critical limitation of Web-based tools described by participants is related to the lack of in-person human contact when accessing these resources. Webinars can seem impersonal, and the subtle, non-verbal cues that are shared during face-to-face contact are lost in this format. As well, it can be more challenging to stimulate group discussion within this context, as maintaining only a virtual presence can discourage some participants from engaging with others who might otherwise prefer one-on-one or small group discussions in person. In response to this concern, we are focusing our efforts on finding innovative ways of enhancing such discussions (e.g., by developing focused activities for participants to engage in) for the upcoming 2009–10 webinar series.

DISCUSSION

Our experiences with developing and delivering Web-based learning tools to enhance evaluation capacity in child and youth mental health service organizations has been largely positive. Despite the challenges described above, OLMs and webinars have been well-received by members of this sector for a number of reasons: information is presented in dynamic ways; learning is active and sustained; learning can happen anytime, anywhere, and at the learner's own pace; and resources are used in a cost-effective way (i.e., time and money do not place limits on the number of learners). Clearly then, users have expressed both satisfaction and interest in using these tools. Certainly part of the motivation relates to pressure from funders to satisfy accountability requirements and the need for evaluation training. However, Web-based tools are also gaining attention as a way of furthering the opportunities for learning within an organization and contributing to a culture of organizational learning (Preskill & Boyle, 2008).

Organizational learning is broadly defined as “an organization’s acquisition of understandings, know-how, techniques, and practices of any kind and by whatever means” (Argyris & Schon, 1996). Web-based learning is conducive to organizational learning as it is active and sustainable, easily accessible anytime and anywhere, and can extend collaboration and learning to an entire staff as opposed to a select few
As fiscal uncertainties and the multifaceted nature of the mental health problems faced by Canadian families persist, individual and organizational learning will increase an agency’s capacity to change and adapt within this complex environment in order to maximize its effectiveness over time (Skerlavaj & Skerlavaj, 2006).

In order to ensure the effectiveness of the Centre’s OLMs and webinars for training and organizational learning, we are continuing to refine these tools as well as our processes for delivery and the evaluation of their impact. We are now offering the OLMs in French, as a way of engaging a larger audience of child and youth service providers. As well, we are working with the instructional designers responsible for developing the interface for the modules to establish an effective, streamlined method for evaluating the impact of this resource on users. Similarly, in terms of the current 2009–10 webinar series, we are working to improve our participant feedback processes, in particular to assess how the knowledge gained will be applied in the service provider’s own day-to-day work, as well as throughout her/his organization. Further, we intend to track levels of participation by measuring the number of participants and organizations represented at each webinar, and the number of times archived webinar materials are downloaded from the Centre’s Web site. Given the promising initial response from users, the Centre has expanded its use of webinars as an interactive learning tool for the current (2009–2010) fiscal year. Just as ECBG recipients were the focus of the FY 2008–09 pilot series, the Centre will now produce a series of webinars to support its Evaluation Implementation Grant (EIG) recipients. The topics planned include a focus on stakeholder analysis, data collection, qualitative methods, and addressing cultural factors in evaluation.

Our longer-term goals will focus on efforts to solidify learning among users. At an individual level, Ali, Hodson-Carleton, and Ryan (2004) point to the importance of social interaction among learners in order to help to reinforce key ideas and complement theory with real-life examples. While the delivery of an online course or a series of webinars alone may not accomplish this, they might lay the foundation for the creation of an online community of learners or a “community of practice” (Wenger, 1998) committed to sharing knowledge in an ongoing way, with the goal of strengthening evaluation-related activities and contributing to expertise in this area. In the past, the Centre has supported the development of such communities of practice (including those with a particular focus on evaluation) and has provided a platform to enable these groups to connect and grow.
At a broader organizational level, we have discussed the importance of a “culture of learning” (Preskill & Boyle, 2008) as the foundation for building and enhancing evaluation capacity in child and youth mental health service organizations. On their own, Web-based tools such as OLMs and webinars may have limited success in accomplishing this goal, however, as a valuable means of communicating knowledge, sharing best practices, and supporting evaluation-related learning, innovative, user-friendly Web-based resources can contribute to an organizational culture that values evaluation as an integral part of service delivery.

Practitioners in the field of child and youth mental health and in the social services more broadly are challenged with the complex task of supporting our communities’ most vulnerable citizens. As caseloads grow and resources continue to be stretched, service providers are increasingly searching for alternative ways to ensure that the supports they provide are efficient and effective, as well as to develop their own professional practice. Web-based resources are valuable tools that can be used to gain knowledge about evaluation and research, particularly when used in concert with face-to-face consultations. Results from our preliminary evaluation of the effectiveness of these tools are encouraging and suggest that the use of these tools reflects a model for innovative teaching and training in the areas of evaluation and research.

NOTES

1. Although the terms “evidence-based practice” (EBP) and “evidence-informed practice” (EIP) are often used interchangeably, the Centre considers these terms to have distinct definitions. The term “evidence-based practice” refers to evidence that is derived solely from findings from randomized control trials. The term “evidence-informed practice” refers to evidence that is derived from a variety of sources including but not limited to randomized control trials, expert knowledge, clinical experience, and client/patient perspectives (Lomas, Culyer, McCutcheon, McAuley, Law, 2005). EIP has a more expansive definition than EBP, and the Centre has thus recently moved away from a sole focus on EBP toward a more inclusive endorsement of EIP.

2. The Centre acknowledges the fact that online access and usage rates vary across communities. As there is a growing trend for organizations to incorporate electronic media in their daily operations, however, the
Centre continues to work towards supporting communities in their use of online resources. For agencies and/or individuals who cannot access our resources electronically, the modules, webinars, and other online resources are available in CD format and/or hard copy upon request.

3. This committee includes members from a range of sectors dealing with child and youth mental health (including education, health, social work, addictions, psychology, and law enforcement).

4. Co-facilitation of group interviews is common practice at the Centre, as one staff person facilitates the interview and the second staff person takes notes and seeks clarification and elaboration from participants when required. This addresses the issue of interviewer bias, and also ensures that an accurate record of the session is obtained.

5. It is important to note that it is likely that many of the same individuals took part in each webinar, so this total does not refer to the number of unique participants.

REFERENCES


**Purnima Sundar**, Ph.D., is the Evaluation and Research Consultant at the Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health. She has several years of experience doing community-based, participatory action research and program evaluation in the areas of community mental health and diversity/multiculturalism. At the Centre, she consults with child and youth mental health service organizations on evaluation and research to identify, develop, and share the latest and most effective evidence in the field in order to meet the evolving needs of children, youth, and families.

**Susan Kasprzak**, M.A., is a Senior Evaluation Officer with the Natural Science and Engineering Research Council (NSERC). She has been working in evaluation for the past nine years in diverse areas including online learning and learning technologies at the University of Alberta, child and youth mental health, and research and innovation in science and engineering. Susan’s current role involves the development and implementation of evaluation frameworks for NSERC funding programs.

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