

One-Room School: The Summer Institute in Program Evaluation

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Abstract: *This article describes the Summer Institute in Program Evaluation conceived and organized in partnership by University of Manitoba faculty members, four partnering organizations in the health and social-service sector, and a university student group. It explains the model of learning, which involves the development of real-life evaluation plans in a week-long intensive course that includes university students and community participants. The article concludes by detailing a series of lessons learned.*

Keywords: *capacity building, community–university partnership, Summer Institute, training*

Resumé : *Le présent article décrit le Summer Institute in Program Evaluation (programme de formation d'été en évaluation de programme) conçu et organisé en partenariat par des professeurs de l'Université du Manitoba, quatre organisations du secteur de la santé et des services sociaux, et un groupe d'étudiants universitaires. Il explique le modèle d'apprentissage, qui inclut l'élaboration de plans d'évaluation concrets pendant un cours intensif d'une semaine auquel participent des étudiants universitaires et des acteurs de la communauté. Nous identifions une série d'enseignements tirés de cette expérience.*

Mots clés : *amélioration de la capacité, partenariat communauté-université, cours d'été, formation*

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For several years, capacity building has been a key area of focus in the evaluation field (Preskill & Boyle, 2008). Evaluation capacity building has also been identified as a professional development priority area by community-based organizations (Goytia et al., 2013) for both external (donors and funders) and internal (organizational effectiveness) reasons (Bozzo, 2002). Preskill and Boyle (p. 443) contend that capacity building seeks “to enhance stakeholders’ understanding of evaluation concepts and practices, and in an effort to create evaluation cultures, organizations have been implementing a variety of strategies to help their members learn from and about evaluation.” There are numerous examples in the literature of different types of evaluation capacity-building initiatives dating back more than 15 years (Hotte, Simmons, Beaton, & LDCEP Workgroup, 2015; Kelly, LaRose, & Scharff, 2014; Norton, Milat, Edwards, & Giffin, 2016; Stockdill, Baizerman, & Compton, 2002), including academic courses in program evaluation that jointly train university students and community members (Kaye-Tzadok & Spiro, 2016; LaVelle & Donaldson, 2010; McShane, Katona, Leroux, & Tandon, 2015; Suiter, Thurber, & Sullivan, 2016).

Other examples of evaluation capacity-building initiatives include short-term training opportunities (e.g., workshops, webinars), mentoring and coaching, use of print and web-based resources, support and information sharing with other community-based organizations, and partnerships with academic institutions and external evaluators. University courses are unique because often faculty, students, and community members or partners co-contribute to the course design, implementation, and evaluation, and learners work on “real” projects (Suiter et al., 2016). The literature suggests that involving faculty, students, and community members or partners in building capacity in program evaluation has the potential to enrich the field. Along these lines, the purpose of this article is to provide a descriptive analysis of a recent Canadian university–community partnership—the Summer Institute in Program Evaluation—for capacity building in program evaluation. Specifically, it highlights the unique features of its learning model, as well as lessons learned.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SUMMER INSTITUTE

The Summer Institute in Program Evaluation (“the Institute”) was conceived and organized by University of Manitoba faculty members from three programs (Family Social Sciences, Social Work, and Human Nutritional Sciences), four partnering organizations in the health and social service sector (the Sexuality Education Resource Centre, Health in Common, United Way Winnipeg, and the Canadian Evaluation Society Manitoba chapter), and a University of Manitoba student group (Community Hub—Information & Research Partnerships). The intention of the partnership was to work together to address three broad needs: to provide access to rigorous program evaluation capacity building to community agencies, to support these agencies in their program-evaluation capabilities, and to provide university students with program-evaluation instruction as experienced in the

“real world.” The first Institute took place in 2010, and it has subsequently been held another six times, with a total of 390 individuals and 40 community agencies taking part over the years. The objectives of the Institute are (a) to increase the capacity of all participants to utilize empirical evidence for program planning and implementation to enhance their program-evaluation capabilities, and (b) to create implementable program-evaluation plans for participating community agencies.

Participants include managers, staff, and volunteers of health and social service agencies (participating community agencies), community members who are involved in health and social programs, as well as undergraduate and graduate university students from a variety of programs including business, community health sciences, education, family social sciences, nursing, social work, and sociology. Over the years, approximately 30% of participants have been community participants, 30% undergraduate students, and 40% graduate students. Community participants are invited to bring a case study to the Institute to work on throughout the week in an effort to create a detailed evaluation plan.

The Institute operates as a 40-hour week-long intensive course, usually in the first week of June. The Institute combines lectures, workshops, presentations, and hands-on team work where the teams develop program-evaluation plans. The agenda of a typical Institute week is shown in [Table 1](#).

Prior to each Institute, resource material is provided to participants via the Institute’s website. The resource documents include lecture slides, summary descriptions of each case study, and other materials. During the Institute, almost

Table 1. Summer Institute Week-Long Agenda

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
AM	Introduction to program evaluation (plenary lectures)	Working with community (plenary lecture) Evaluation design (breakout classes: Level A & Level B)	Indigenous knowledge (plenary lecture) Qualitative methods (breakout classes: Level A & Level B)	Evaluation checklist (plenary lecture) Quantitative methods (breakout classes: Level A & Level B)	Team work Teams 1, 2, 3 evaluation plans
PM	Ethics in evaluation Communicating results Q & A	Program theory of change (plenary lecture) Team work	Team work	Team work	Teams 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 evaluation plans Closing gathering

Note. Level A = beginner, B = intermediate/advanced

40% of the time is dedicated to hands-on team work. Eight teams are formed and each team works with a different participating community agency to develop a feasible evaluation plan for the project or program that the agency has chosen. On the last day of the Institute, each team presents its evaluation plan, followed by discussion. Critiques are encouraged as both a learning experience and as useful feedback to strengthen the evaluation plans. After the Institute, one of the main assignments for graduate students is to elaborate on the evaluation plans, closely following the framework their team developed during the Institute. Over the years, approximately 40 evaluation plans have been developed for participating community organizations, including Project Neecheewam: The Strong Hearted Buffalo Women Crisis Stabilization Unit, Infectious Questions Podcast Program—NCCID, SHiFT Sexual Health Facilitator Training—Women’s Health Clinic, Ogijita Pimatiswin Kinamatwin—Warrior Moving Forward in a Good Way, SO Active SO Healthy—Seven Oaks School Division, YMCA–YWCA After School Programs for Youth With Special Needs, Addition of Occupational Therapy and Physical Therapy—Northern Connections Medical Centre, North End Healthy Eating—Food Matters Manitoba, and Good Food Club—West Broadway Community Organization.

University students receive course credit and thus have to complete several assignments within one month after the Institute ends. Community participants receive an official letter of attendance and are not required to do assignments.

The Institute is funded by several sources. The University of Manitoba covers the cost of space, promotion, and faculty members who provide instruction. Instructors from partnering organizations are paid with funds raised by the Institute through registration fees. Community participants pay a fee; however, external funding has been obtained to subsidize community participants who could not afford the full fee. Because of the availability of the subsidy, to the best of our knowledge, no agency or individual has been unable to attend due to the cost of the registration fee.

MODEL OF LEARNING: REAL-LIFE EVALUATION PLANS IN A ONE-ROOM SCHOOL

The Institute creates a space where evaluators, researchers, participants from community agencies, and university students complement each other’s knowledge and experience. In our previous experience working with community organizations, we had repeatedly heard about the need for interactive, focused training that would increase conceptual knowledge and skills related to the use of research findings and the evaluation of programs. The model of learning that the Institute uses addresses this need. It provides a mix of theoretical, technical, and practical hands-on learning formats, added to a rich interdisciplinary and inter-sectoral mix of instructors and participants. Simultaneously, it offers university students the opportunity to work with community agencies. As such, the learning model can be described as a “one-room school” that develops real-life evaluation plans.

The week-long intensive experience creates a space for collaboration that is successful in two ways. First, the lectures provide conceptual and technical information, including basic notions of program evaluation, methodological components, ethical considerations, utilization-focused (Patton, 2012) and participatory evaluation processes, and other approaches such as Indigenous ways of knowing. Some lectures are provided to all participants, and some are provided simultaneously and separately at an introductory and a more advanced level, tailored to the level of prior knowledge and experience of participants. The lectures and discussions create a common backdrop of information for both experienced and inexperienced participants.

Second, teams of approximately eight members work together for several hours each day to develop evaluation plans for participating community agencies. Each team is composed of one or two key informants (individuals who work in the participating community agency that is providing the program or project for which the team will develop the evaluation plan), one facilitator (an experienced evaluator who is from one of the partner organizations of the Institute), at least one community participant, and ideally two undergraduate and two graduate students. Except for the facilitator, whose role is to assist the team in progressing toward its final goal, all team members have equal input. However, the key informants have the final decision, given that they represent the interests of the participating community agency used as the case study.

The intention is that the work done during the Institute will mimic the real-life dynamics of creating an evaluation plan. Without exception, every team has developed the framework of a realistic evaluation plan. The experience of working in a team composed of individuals with different backgrounds, experiences, and knowledge on a real-life case toward a clear goal has been shown to be one of the most valuable aspects of the Institute for all participants. Feedback from Institute participants provides evidence in this regard.

Introduction to Program Evaluation is an undergraduate course taught at the same university in the traditional lecture-style format during the regular winter session. It covers the same content as that of the Institute and is taught by the same instructor who is the lead instructor at the Institute. As such, it offers an interesting natural comparison. In Table 2, item scores of the course evaluations completed by undergraduate students from the regular winter session (on average, 60 undergraduate students each year) and from the Institute (on average, 20 undergraduate students per Institute) are compared. The tool used to compare the courses is the Students' Evaluation of Educational Quality (SEEQ), a standardized and validated tool (Marsh, 2007) that is used for all undergraduate courses at the University of Manitoba. The scores of three summary items that assess the course and the instructor(s) overall are shown. On average, over all years, students assessed the Institute course compared to all other university courses as between good and very good (4.22), whereas the regular winter session course was assessed as between average and good (3.44). Similarly, student assessments were better for the Institute course compared to the regular session on two other items

Table 2. Undergraduate University Students' Assessments of the Summer Institute in Comparison to the Regular Program Evaluation Course

Q30—Compared to other courses I have had at X, I would say this course is: 1 = very poor; 2 = poor; 3 = average; 4 = good; 5 = very good								
Course & Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	Mean
Regular	3.4	3.6	3.8	3.2	3.6	3.0	3.3	3.41
Summer Institute	4.3	4.3	4.1	4.3	4.1	n/a	4.2	4.22
Q31—Compared with other instructors I have had at X, I would say this instructor is: 1 = very poor; 2 = poor; 3 = average; 4 = good; 5 = very good								
Course & Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	Mean
Regular	4.0	4.1	4.5	4.2	4.1	3.5	4.0	4.06
Summer Institute	4.0	4.5	4.6	4.2	4.6	n/a	4.8	4.45
Q32—As an overall rating, I would say this instructor is: 1 = very poor; 2 = poor; 3 = average; 4 = good; 5 = very good								
Course & Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	Mean
Regular	3.9	4.1	4.5	4.1	4.1	3.5	4.0	4.03
Summer Institute	3.9	4.8	4.6	4.2	4.5	n/a	4.8	4.47

(Table 2). These results suggest that the format of the Institute works well, even with undergraduate students. In addition, the high rating of the Institute course vis-à-vis other courses seems to imply that the format of the Institute has strong applicability to the undergraduate experience.

Although we do not have comparison scores for graduate students, because Introduction to Program Evaluation is not taught as a regular-session graduate course, the ratings have been consistently high each year for the same three items. The average six-year scores are as follows: Q30, 4.27; Q31, 4.34; and Q32, 4.45. These ratings provide evidence that graduate students considered the experience highly valuable.

The SEEQ was not provided to community participants; however, other assessments were conducted. To assess knowledge about program evaluation, each participant was asked to respond to a series of questions at the start of the Institute and the same questions at the end. These questions were developed by the Institute's organizing team. The follow-up also included an open comment section. The questionnaires were self-administered and, to ensure anonymity, were dropped off in a closed box. On average, the response rate each year was 95%.

In terms of impact of the Institute on knowledge, findings from the before and after questionnaires administered to participants during the 2016 Institute are presented in Figure 1. All Institute participants answered the questions, including community participants and undergraduate and graduate students. Participants reported an increase in knowledge on all items, especially those specific to evaluation processes. The increase was less for general methodology items.

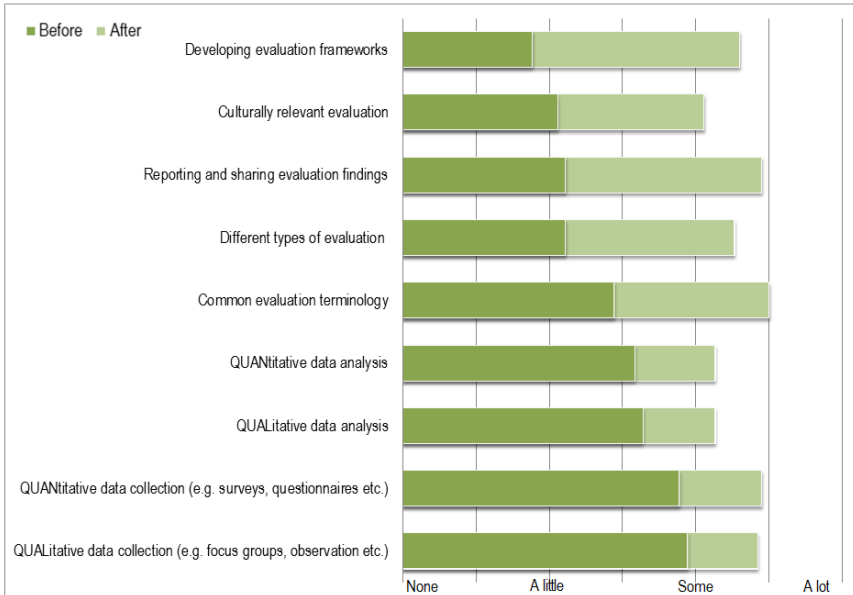


Figure 1. *Before and After Knowledge Items—2016 Summer Institute*

To illustrate what participants thought about the Institute, below are several verbatim comments that were representative of the majority of those received:

“Thank you to the group, to the students . . . it helped me to gain a lot of confidence . . . for myself another way to think about the logic model.”

“This was a breath of fresh air, coming from an organization to the academia, again. It was hard the first day, but now being able to see and bring the theoretical side into real life. That was great for me.”

“I really liked the case study process. The experience provided me with a concrete understanding of the evaluation process.”

“Great to be able to do hands on work with evaluation—see how it should be set up.”

There were also suggestions for improvement that we incorporated to revise aspects of the Institute, such as the following:

“Would have been good to have a little more information on the timeline of events ahead of time.”

“. . . some of the stuff about anti-oppression and empowerment and indigenous evaluation . . . actually it would have been nice to have a bit more of that involved.”

However, the somewhat differing agendas of Institute participants may also explain conflicting feedback. The quotations that follow illustrate this point:

“Maybe, if anything, she [the team facilitator] might have gotten too involved in some of the decision making rather than letting us struggle it out.”

“I think they could have been a little bit more involved. I think it was beneficial for the students . . . he [the team facilitator] would be hands off and throw the odd thing out . . . he was doing some great things for students but I felt a little lost in my role . . . I would have appreciated a little more of a hands-on approach.”

In 2016 we conducted a follow-up survey of the agencies that had developed evaluation plans during the Institute in previous years to assess if they had been able to actually conduct the evaluations. With a response rate of 80%, half of the agencies indicated that they had conducted the evaluations partially or in their entirety. The main reasons provided for not implementing their evaluation plans were limited resources and staff turnover. Agencies also commented that the Institute had helped them identify who to contact if they needed support with program evaluation.

In summary, the interaction among participants seems to have been a catalyst for a sustainable collaboration between academia and community organizations. It has also enhanced the learning opportunities of both community participants and undergraduate and graduate university students. Consistently, Institute participants have expressed how they have benefited from this experience. University students particularly valued the hands-on experience of working with community agencies, and community participants valued the engagement with academia and university students, and the fact that they received an evaluation plan for their agency. This learning model has produced consistently valuable capacity building experiences for all participants and may well be replicable in different contexts.

LESSONS LEARNED

The Summer Institute in Program Evaluation appears to be a valuable initiative in building evaluation capacity in Manitoba. Among its central characteristics is what other authors have called facilitating interactive evaluation practice that engages stakeholders constructively (Stevahn & King, 2016). It incorporates aspects of other capacity-building initiatives, such as the Swedish experience with evaluation workshops for capacity building in welfare work (Karlsson, Beijer, Eriksson, & Leissner, 2008) and seeks to support an evaluative learning culture (Hoole & Patterson, 2008).

Now that we have organized seven Institutes, our experience has led to some lessons learned. These were arrived at by examining evaluation data, debriefing and reflections by Institute organizers, and feedback from stakeholders:

1. The value of bringing together university students, both undergraduate and graduate, and community-based practitioners to learn together

about program evaluation cannot be overstated. Despite—or because of—potential tensions that may arise due to somewhat differing perspectives and priorities, participants had a positive and unique learning experience. There appeared to be three main reasons for this: the combination of lectures, case studies, and group work; the creation of a common space where evaluators, researchers, practitioners, and students were able to learn together and complement their knowledge and experience; and the use of real cases to develop evaluation plans.

2. The nature of the community–university partnership is critically important to the success of the Institute. Even with the best of efforts, if the Institute were organized solely by the university, the lack of external perspectives, expertise, and networks would have merely replicated a university course, albeit with a unique format. The lifeline of the Institute is the partnership.
3. The diversity of instructors (from the university and the community) is a strong asset. Attention to collaboration among the partnering organizations has paid off in benefits for students.
4. The Institute has been effective in increasing participants' knowledge and capabilities in evaluation frameworks and plans, reporting evaluation findings, different types of evaluation approaches, evaluation terminology, and evaluation methodology.
5. The organization of the Institute puts extra demands on the time of faculty members and individuals from partnering organizations. These efforts require the acknowledgement and support of their institutions.
6. The main barrier for participation from community agencies is not financial, in large part because of the subsidies available, but one of time. In our experience, agencies in general, and more so small agencies, have a hard time releasing staff or management for one full week of training. This fact has led us to explore alternative ways of scheduling the Institute, while understanding that the week-long intensive approach has its own advantages.
7. Participating community agencies emerge with realistic evaluation plans, although only half of those who responded to the survey were able to actually conduct the evaluations. Nonetheless, the networks that many of these agencies established at the Institute have helped them obtain support to conduct their evaluations. Without these connections, the number of agencies conducting evaluations may have been even lower.

To address several of these issues, the partnering organizations are in the process of creating a Program Evaluation Research Group, which will be a community–university hub where community-serving agencies, students, and faculty members can interact, exchange knowledge, and collaborate in program and policy evaluation. The success of the one-room school has launched the partnering organizations to a higher level of community–university engagement

in program evaluation that is expected to be of even more benefit to community agencies, students, faculty members, and the community at large.

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