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ABSTRACT

The impact of professional jargon and data-based statements in evaluation reports on audience responses to an evaluation report and an evaluator's recommendations was examined. Subjects read one of four evaluation reports about testing and grading procedures in a school program. The reports varied in the amount of jargon and data used to justify the recommendations. Ninety-five high school teachers and administrators read one of four short reports, each containing one of the following types of statements: (1) Jargon-Loaded, Objective, (2) Jargon-Free, Objective, (3) Jargon-Loaded, Subjective, and (4) Jargon-Free, Subjective. The Jargon-Loaded reports were rated as more technical than the Jargon-Free reports. The least difficult format was the Jargon-Free Subjective report and the most difficult was the Jargon-Loaded Subjective report. The Subjective reports were rated as more practical and the Jargon-Loaded Subjective reports were rated as less believable than Jargon-Free Objective reports. There were no differences in reactions to the recommendations of the evaluator. The results suggest that the impact of an evaluation report depends upon the style in which it is written. (Author)

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Evaluator Credibility and Acceptance as a Function of Report Style: Do Jargon and Data Make a Difference?[1]

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The evaluation of compensatory and innovative programs in education, services in mental and community health, and societal reforms has existed long enough to have questions of its utility and worth raised by all types of publics, including evaluators themselves. Do policy and decision makers utilize evaluative information and, furthermore, are they influenced by the feedback they receive?

Evidence regarding the impact of evaluation on decision-making is mostly experiential and often suggests that the influence is not as powerful as might be hoped (Guba, 1969; Worthen & Sanders, 1973; Wergin, 1976). Davis and Salasin (1975) in their extensive review of the utilization of evaluation state, "A portion of the apparent demoralization among veteran evaluators may be attributed to the slow process of utilization of evaluation results." (p. 625) However, they also point out that the utilization rate is better when the impact of evaluation on decision making is assessed over an extended period of time.

Several suggestions for increasing the utilization of evaluative information in policy and decision making have been advanced. Davis and Salasin (1975) suggest that evaluators trace the use of their evaluations to detect when and how the results are used. Stake (1975) and House (1973), among others, have suggested that a useful evaluation is one that is responsive to the informal needs of decision makers.

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Formal reports of an evaluation generally contain jargon which provide precise and efficient communication to colleagues and include extensive references to data to give objective support to the evaluator's recommendations. Information and communication theory, however, would suggest a possible interactive effect depending upon the type of audience. Carter (1971) and Braskamp, Brown and Newman (1976), for example, have reported that acceptance of evaluation reports is related to a complex set of variables, including the title and description of the evaluator, the nature of the program being evaluated, and the self-interests of the audience. Others in communications research have found that the use of information will be greater if the audience regards the presentation as coherent and understandable (Davis and Salasin, 1975).

This study examined the impact of different evaluation report styles on audience agreement with an evaluator's recommendations, audience rating of the evaluator's credibility, and audience assessment of the evaluation report. Two dimensions of report styles were studied: (a) the amount of professional jargon, and (b) the use of data-based statements. The questions of interest were whether the use of jargon enhance or detract from audience acceptance of the recommendations and from their ratings of the utility of the evaluation reports, and whether data-based or subjective-based statements in the evaluation report affect audience ratings of the objectivity and believability of the evaluator.

Methodology

Subjects were asked to read a simulated evaluation report that was written in four different ways and to give their reactions to the evaluator and the evaluation report. The context of the evaluation report was community concern about testing and grading in the public schools. A citizens' council asked an external evaluator to gather relevant data and make appropriate recommendations to them. The evaluation report was an advocacy report focusing on four issues: (1) Use of criterion-

referenced standards in assessing student classroom performance, (2) Need for more parent conferences, (3) Assessment of student effort as well as achievement, and (4) Assessment of non-academic accomplishments. Each recommendation advocated changes in current practices followed by a brief justification. Subjects were asked to read the recommendation and its justification before indicating their own viewpoints.

Four reports (treatments) were developed which had the same issues, recommendations, length, concepts, and arguments. Each justification varied, however, in the amount of jargon and/or data-based statements. The four treatments were: (1) Jargon-Loaded Objective, (2) Jargon-Loaded Subjective, (3) Jargon-Free Objective, and (4) Jargon-Free Subjective. Jargon words were operationally defined as those which succinctly conveyed a concept to a professional audience, which were in frequent usage in an educational setting, and for which there were more general usage words or phrases available. These included such words as "norm-referenced," "competency," "transpersonal," and "psychomotor." Objective-based statements were operationally defined as statements which reported local and national survey results and cited percentages. Subjective-based statements included phrases like "I believe...," "I think...," "In my opinion..." to emphasize the evaluator's personal opinions.

Subjects included 95 teachers and public school administrators who were involved in a variety of workshops and self-improvement courses at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. These subjects were assumed to be familiar with educational jargon and had some experience with evaluation reports. As educators they had undoubtedly thought through issues related to grading, which was the focus of the report.

Dependent measures included assessment of: (1) Agreement with the evaluator's recommendations; (2) Ratings of the evaluator on thoroughness, self-confidence,

knowledge about testing and grading, believability, awareness of school needs, logic, practicality, convincing and objectivity; and (3) Ratings of the evaluation report on amount of technical terms and difficulty level.

After each issue the subjects indicated their agreement on a five point scale (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree) to four specific recommendations advocated by the evaluator. The extent of subject agreement with the evaluator's four recommendations for each of the four issues was used as the measure of agreement. At the end of the simulation each subject rated the evaluator and the report by indicating his responses on a five point scale (Very High to Very Low) to eleven items measuring the dependent variables listed above.

Results

The respondents' extent of agreement with the evaluator's recommendations were analyzed using a two-factor analysis of variance. Table 1 presents the summary of the analysis of variance and Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations. No statistically significant interactions or main effects, use of jargon and use of data were obtained.

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Insert Table 1 and 2 about here

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Responses to the nine ratings of the evaluator and the two items assessing the evaluation report were analyzed using a two-factor multivariate analysis of variance. The summary of the F's are presented in Table 3 and the means and standard deviations of all eleven items are presented in Table 4.

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Insert Table 3 and 4 about here

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There was no significant multivariate interaction when the 11 rating items were analyzed as a set. The multivariate F for the Data factor was not significant.

The multivariate F for the jargon factor was significant at the .05 level. Examination of the size of the univariate F's indicate that the major contributions to the overall effect of the use of jargon were on ratings of difficulty, technicality, knowledge, and practicality. Examination of the means in Table 4 indicate that the jargon-loaded report was perceived as more difficult and more technical, but the evaluator was perceived as more knowledgeable and practical. The evaluator as author of the jargon-loaded objective report received the highest ratings on thoroughness, knowledge, believability, and practicality. The jargon-loaded subjective report was viewed as the most technical and difficult of the four reports.

There was a significant univariate F for interaction on ratings of difficulty of the report. Examination of the means in Table 4 indicates that this interaction was disordinal with the jargon-loaded subjective report being perceived as most difficult and the jargon-free subjective being perceived as least difficult.

Discussion and Implications

These results suggest that the impact of an evaluation report depends upon the style in which it is written. The use of technical educational jargon, in particular, appears to have an impact upon the receptivity of an audience of educators. The jargon-loaded reports were clearly perceived as more technical by the readers than the jargon-free reports; but, interestingly, the jargon-loaded subjective report was perceived as more technical than the jargon-loaded objective. Similarly, the teachers and administrators perceived the reports with jargon-loaded statements to be more difficult but their

perception was influenced by the inclusion of data-based statements. The most difficult report was the jargon-loaded subjective followed by the jargon-loaded objective, jargon-free objective, and the least difficult, the jargon-free subjective. It may be that the use of data, in this case simple percentages, gave the reader meaningful anchor points for interpretation.

Use of data to support evaluator viewpoints did not by itself contribute to higher ratings of the evaluator. However, when data and jargon were combined, the impact was apparent. The writer of the jargon-loaded reports was rated as more practical and knowledgeable than the jargon-free author. Though there was no significant interaction, examination of the means in Table 4 indicates that the major contribution to the overall difference came from the higher ratings given to the jargon-loaded objective reports. Data support did help make the evaluator appear more knowledgeable and the report more practical. The same pattern, though not significant, was true for ratings of thoroughness and believability. In each instance the jargon-loaded objective report was rated highest.

The lack of any significant difference or pattern on ratings of "convincing" is congruent with the lack of significant differences in extent of agreement with the evaluator's recommendations. There are a number of possible explanations for this finding. The issues dealt with in the report, grading and testing, are ones for which most educators have rather definite opinions. Educators may be receptive to change, but not in the evaluation format used in this study. The opinions of the educators were strong enough to resist being influenced, despite the fact that the report style variations did affect their ratings of the evaluator and the usefulness of the report.

The results of this study confirm the expectation that evaluation report styles do affect audience perceptions. For educators the use of jargon and data

results in high ratings on some dimensions, such as practicality and knowledge, but does not seem to influence their acceptance of the evaluator's recommendations on controversial issues. Further investigation is needed on the effects of differing report styles for a variety of audience types on different issues. How would members of the P.T.A. react to the same reports? How would educators react to similar report variations on different topics?

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Table 1

Analysis of Variance Summary on Extent of Agreement with Evaluator's Recommendations

Source	df	MS	F
Jargon (A)	1	32.08	.65
Data Support (B)	1	17.63	.35
Interaction (AxB)	1	6.08	.12
Within	91	49.33	
Total	95	105.12	

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations on Extent of Agreement with Evaluator's Recommendations

		Jargon-Loaded	Jargon-Free
Objective	$\bar{X}$	57.33	59.04
	SD	7.32	6.44
	N	24	22
Subjective	$\bar{X}$	58.66	59.36
	SD	8.09	5.72
	N	27	22

Table 3

Summary of Multivariate Analysis of Ratings of

Evaluator and Evaluation Report

Source of Variation	Multivariate F	Univariate F
Interaction	.92	
Scale:		
Thoroughness		1.13
Self-Confidence		.38
Knowledge		3.48
Believability		1.40
Logical		.00
Practical		1.96
Awareness		1.99
Convincing		.09
Objectivity		.17
Technicality		1.45
Difficulty		5.64*
Data Support	.92	
Scale:		
Thoroughness		1.02
Self-Confidence		.33
Knowledge		.52
Believability		.84
Logical		.22
Practical		.17
Awareness		.61
Convincing		.00
Objectivity		1.72
Technicality		1.89
Difficulty		.01
Jargon		
Scale:	2.66*	
Thoroughness		.40
Self-Confidence		.70
Knowledge		2.63
Believability		.02
Logical		.41
Practical		2.18
Awareness		.00
Convincing		.12
Objectivity		.32
Technicality		23.70*
Difficulty		12.26*

*Significant at .05 level

Table 4

Means and Standard Deviations of Ratings of Evaluator and Evaluation Report

	Jargon-Loaded Objective N=24		Jargon-Loaded Subjective N=27		Jargon-Free Objective N=22		Jargon-Free Subjective N=22	
	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD
Thoroughness	3.79	.59	3.46	.88	3.50	.96	3.52	.73
Self Confidence	4.00	.51	4.00	.90	3.73	1.08	3.96	.96
Knowledgeable about testing and grading	4.25	.74	3.89	.68	3.73	.63	3.01	.79
Believability	3.88	.80	3.54	.92	3.64	.79	3.70	.76
Logical	3.71	1.00	3.78	.79	3.82	1.09	3.91	.67
Practicality	3.67	1.09	3.46	1.23	3.00	1.31	3.43	.73
Awareness of School Needs	3.58	1.28	3.46	1.04	3.27	1.24	3.78	.74
Convincing	3.58	1.39	3.54	.92	3.59	.73	3.65	.71
Objectivity	3.71	.86	3.39	1.13	3.73	.83	3.56	.73
Technicality	3.33	1.09	3.82	.90	2.64	1.09	2.65	.71
Difficulty	2.71	1.04	3.14	.88	2.50	1.10	1.96	.93