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## Using Responsive Evaluation to Evaluate a Professional Conference

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### **Abstract**

In a statewide conference on alternative methods for assessing students' learning, we incorporated responsive evaluation methods into the structure of the conference. The application of these interactive evaluation techniques serves as a pilot study that illustrates the possible utility of these techniques in evaluating conferences. This paper provides a brief review of the literature surrounding responsive evaluation, a description of the responsive evaluation methods applied to this conference, and a discussion of the results and implications of this pilot study.

### **Introduction**

As part of a statewide effort in Nebraska to improve math and science education, a two-day summer conference was held in Lincoln and attended by more than 300 participants, including school teachers and administrators, state policy makers, and other education professionals. The conference focused on new techniques for assessing students' learning. The goals of the conference included: (1) increasing participant knowledge of alternative strategies for assessing learning, (2) providing opportunities for discussion and reflection on the effectiveness of such strategies, and (3) increasing participant knowledge of state and national assessment goals and models. To attain those goals, the conference activities were focused on enhancing awareness of the importance of accurate assessment of student outcomes and addressing the complex issues involved in rethinking assessment methods and their role in the school classrooms. Conference presenters included nationally-known figures in student assessment and related fields.

### *Evaluation Goals*

The evaluation of the conference served as a pilot study of the effectiveness of applying responsive evaluation methods to the evaluation of conferences. Consequently, the evaluation for this conference was designed to be integrated into the workings of the conference. Our goal for the evaluation was not only to determine the value of the conference at its conclusion but also to make the evaluation an integral part of the conference itself.

### *Characteristics of Responsive Evaluation*

The evaluation approach used at this conference is based on the responsive evaluation approach developed by Stake (1975, 1976, 1983). Responsive evaluation has been used in varied settings for many years, but the application to conferences is, to our knowledge, unique. In particular, our use of ongoing, interactive communication between the evaluators and the participants, the attention the evaluators paid to the conference participants and their perspectives, the qualitative nature of the information gathered, and the integration of the evaluation into the conference are consistent with Stake's descriptions of characteristics of responsive evaluation.

In an early discussion of this method, Stake defines an evaluation as responsive "if it orients more directly to program activities than to program intents; responds to audience requirements for information; and if the different value-perspectives present are referred to in reporting the success and failure of the program" (1975, p. 14). Responsive evaluation focuses on the concerns of the primary stakeholders, gathered through conversations with these parties on an ongoing basis during the evaluation. In responsive evaluation, the role of the evaluator is that of a full, subjective partner in the program, highly involved and interactive (Stake, 1975), and the evaluator provides an avenue for continued communication and feedback throughout the evaluation process.

### *Advantages to Responsive Evaluation*

Evaluators cite several advantages to the responsive approach. Responsive evaluation allows questions to emerge during the evaluation process rather than being preformulated; it enables the evaluator to acquire a rapid understanding of the program and to determine which issues and concerns are most important to a variety of stakeholders. It is a flexible approach that uses content-rich information to portray a program in a way that is readily accessible to audiences (Hurteau & Nadeau, 1985; Klintberg, 1976; Sorcinelli, Parson, & Halpem, 1984; Stake, 1983). The nature of the feedback provided in responsive evaluation provides the audiences with an opportunity to react to the evaluator's feedback and to interact with the evaluator about their issues and concerns. The approach explicitly recognizes the values and perspectives held by different audiences, and it provides a context in which to examine these different concerns (Sorcinelli, Parsons, & Halpem, 1984). Ultimately, this recognition results in more comprehensive data collection, producing an evaluation accessible to the diverse stakeholders (Paolucci-Whitcomb, Bright, Carlson, & Meyers, 1987; Rockwell, 1982; Schermerhom & Williams, 1979).

### *Limits to Responsive Evaluation*

Limits to the responsive evaluation approach include a large time commitment to the evaluation process and the need for highly skilled evaluators (Hurteau & Nadeau, 1985; Klintberg, 1976; Stake, 1983). With the high level of interaction between evaluator and stakeholders, the role of the evaluator might become ambiguous in responsive evaluations, resulting in the evaluator serving as a resource person rather than a researcher. Also, because the model is so flexible, it may be difficult to maintain the focus of the evaluation, resulting in a failure to answer specific questions (Hurteau & Nadeau, 1985; Stake, 1983).

### *The Conference Evaluation*

In the conference evaluation described herein, responsive evaluation in its fullest form was obviously not possible. The conference lasted only two days, with an agenda and speakers set far in advance, and little modification of the program was feasible. However, the evaluation reflected responsive evaluation principles in that it was oriented toward conference activities rather than conference intents, it focused on participants and their varying information requirements, and it maintained a highly interactive structure throughout the conference that provided opportunities for the evaluators to become immersed in the conference, along with the participants.

### *Evaluation Methods*

Several unconventional data-gathering methods were employed during the conference. These methods included conducting brief interviews, limited to two or three questions, during session breaks; taking and displaying photographs of participants, speakers, and various activities during conference sessions; and lastly, administering a nontraditional feedback evaluation form to participants at the conclusion of the conference. Information gathered from these methods was immediately processed and communicated to the conference participants, who in turn had an opportunity to react to their coparticipants' comments.

### *Interviews*

Beginning with the initial registration and continuing during break times throughout the conference, the evaluation team conducted brief interviews with participants (see table 1 for a sample of the types of questions used). The questions used at the beginning of the conference focused on participants' expectations for the conference, and why they had decided to attend the conference. Later questions addressed participants' reactions to specific presentations. Toward the end of the conference, questions focused on the conference as a whole. Approximately 10–20 participants were interviewed during each break session. By the end of the conference, more than 170 of these brief interviews had been conducted. The short time period between sessions necessitated a greater level of formality in the interviews than is typical of responsive evaluation methods. The participants' comments were continuously compiled into a data file and printed onto overheads that were prominently displayed in the lobby of the conference center (see fig. 1 for a sample display). Displays of comments were updated during every presentation session. As a result, participants could peruse reactions to sessions they had attended as well as to those they had not. By

the end of the conference, more than 80 separate participant comments (about half of the total) had been displayed in this manner.

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**Table 1.** Examples of Interview Questions Used in Brief Interviews

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*Questions*

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Day One, morning:

- What do you hope to gain from this conference?
- What are you expecting from this conference?
- What did you think about the "Equity in Assessment" presentation?
- What did you learn from the "Equity in Assessment" presentation?

Day One, afternoon:

- What did you think about the case study that was just presented?
- What did you think about the alternative assessment models that were presented?
- What do you think of the conference so far?
- Is this conference meeting your expectations?
- What have been the best and worst aspects of the conference?

Day Two, morning:

- How do you feel about the conference right now?
- How would you describe this conference to a friend?
- What did you think about the "Content Objectives" presentation?
- How useful was the "Content Objectives" presentation to you?

Day Two, afternoon:

- How worthwhile have you found this conference?
  - How much have you learned at this conference?
  - What have been the worst and best aspects of the conference?
  - How would you sum up your overall feeling about the conference?
  - Were you surprised by anything at this conference?
-

Examples of Conference Participant Comments

59. [Presentation Y had] good ideas of how to make things more real life. Also did a good job of relating to [previous] talk. It was good to hear her assess her own program.

-- 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher

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60. I thought [the last presentation] was an innovative way to teach math, social studies, and economics.

-- middle/high school special education teacher

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61. The "Alternative Assessment" did hands-on, so it was much better than a lecture kind of thing. They fired up the participants.

-- elementary principal

---

62. Good. The conference has given perspectives from both math and science – practical stuff.

-- high school teacher

---

63. Really interesting. I've gotten alternative ways of teaching!

-- community college instructor

---

64. Dr. X's talk was so-so. Hard to see; hard to hear. Good points.

-- male participant

---

65. Dr. X was great!

-- principal

---

66. Dr. Y was excellent. Reinforced what I already know.

-- program director

Figure 1. Example of participant comments displayed on overhead projector.

*Reaction/feedback forms*

In addition to this large-screen display, representative comments from the interviews were selected and compiled. Those from the first morning were reproduced and then distributed to participants during the lunch break. Participants were asked to react to and comment on the statements in a space provided on the form (see fig. 2). Similarly, afternoon comments were distributed during the evening meal and participants were encouraged to provide their written reactions. Throughout the conference, individual reaction/comment sheets were available in every session and in the lobby, next to the overhead display. These written comments were included along with the interview responses on the overhead display. This method promoted the goal of creating interaction between the conference participants and the evaluation process. In contrast to traditional evaluation methodologies, this responsive technique provided an ongoing forum for participants to observe the evaluation data on a sample of participants' perceptions of the conference proceedings.

Twenty-five participants chose to provide specific written feedback responding to their colleagues' comments about the conference.

**Assessment: Its Roles...**  
**Participant Reaction Form**  
 (please complete and drop at evaluation booth in lobby)

*Some Thursday Morning Participant Comments...*

1. I'm rewriting our curriculum in math and science and I'm hoping to gain some new ideas. -1st/2nd grade teacher	2. (I'm looking for) new ideas and encouragement. -high school teacher	3. (I'm here to) kill some time. -elementary teacher
4. (I hope to get) more ideas... a few ideas I can take back to the classroom. -7th grade teacher	5. The last presenter reviewed some things which I was quite familiar with, then added her own concerns without preaching. She very effectively modeled for us what she meant by a "warm start". -classroom teacher	6. I liked this morning presenter. She only gave lip service to science. -high school teacher
7. I wish the last presenter would have gotten more into equity. -professor	8. (The Equity in Assessment talk had) excellent analogies in the end. -middle level teacher	9. (This morning's talk) was very interesting. The speaker was able to involve a large group. -middle/high school math teacher
10. I enjoyed (Equity in Assessment). The presenter was exciting, not boring. -principal	11. (The speaker had) practical uses and ways of assessing. An eye opener. -7th-12th grade teacher	12. (She was) great! No new stuff but reinforced a lot. -high school teacher

**Any Reactions?**

Reaction to any of these comments? (Please indicate comment #)

Overall reaction to conference, activities?

**Figure 2.** Example of Participant Reaction Form, with selected comments by participants.

*Photographs*

Another medium, photographs, also was an integral part of the evaluation. Throughout the first day and the first half of the second day, speakers, participants, handouts, display areas, and other conference activities were captured on film. These photos were developed and printed immediately so that by early afternoon on the first day, events and materials from the morning sessions were displayed on a board in the lobby. Three sets of photographs, totaling nearly 100 photos, were on display by the end of the conference. Again,



individual reaction/comment sheets were available for participants to provide feedback about the photographs. This allowed participants to see sessions that they did not attend, refreshed their memories of sessions they did attend, and provided them with a broader context within which to view their own experience. Specifically, these photographs provided detailed reminders to participants about the level of activity and participation in different sessions, the variety of activities occurring at the conference, and the reaction of participants to different aspects of their experiences.

The conference participants were directly involved in the evaluation by providing and reacting to the variety of information about the conference through the interviews and through their observation and response to other participants' comments. Similarly, the evaluators, in performing between-session interviews, taking photographs during conference sessions and displaying both the recorded comments and the pictures, became immersed in the conference. As a result, the evaluators did not attempt to play the role of objective, complacent observers, but rather became subjective, interactive participants in the conference itself.

Because interviewees were chosen at random, the comments were intended to be representative of the perspectives of all participants. As mentioned previously, the participants were not only school teachers but also administrators and policy makers. The responsive evaluation gathered information from and responded to information requirements from all of these participant groups, recognizing and validating their different perspectives by including their feedback. Within the natural variations imposed by random selection, no voice or perspective was privileged over another, and the diverse input was evident.

#### *Summative evaluation form*

A summative evaluation form was distributed at the end of the conference. This instrument took a nontraditional form (see fig. 3a and 3b). Participants were asked to graph their responses to the questions about the conference. One section required participants to draw a bar graph on a scale ranging from 0 to 100 to indicate to what extent they felt the goals of the conference had been met. Another section displayed two "thermometers" on which participants indicated their ratings of their own effort and the overall quality of the conference. Again, a space for open-ended comments was provided. Asking participants about their own level of involvement is somewhat unusual and emphasizes the role that participants play in the success of a conference and in the evaluation.

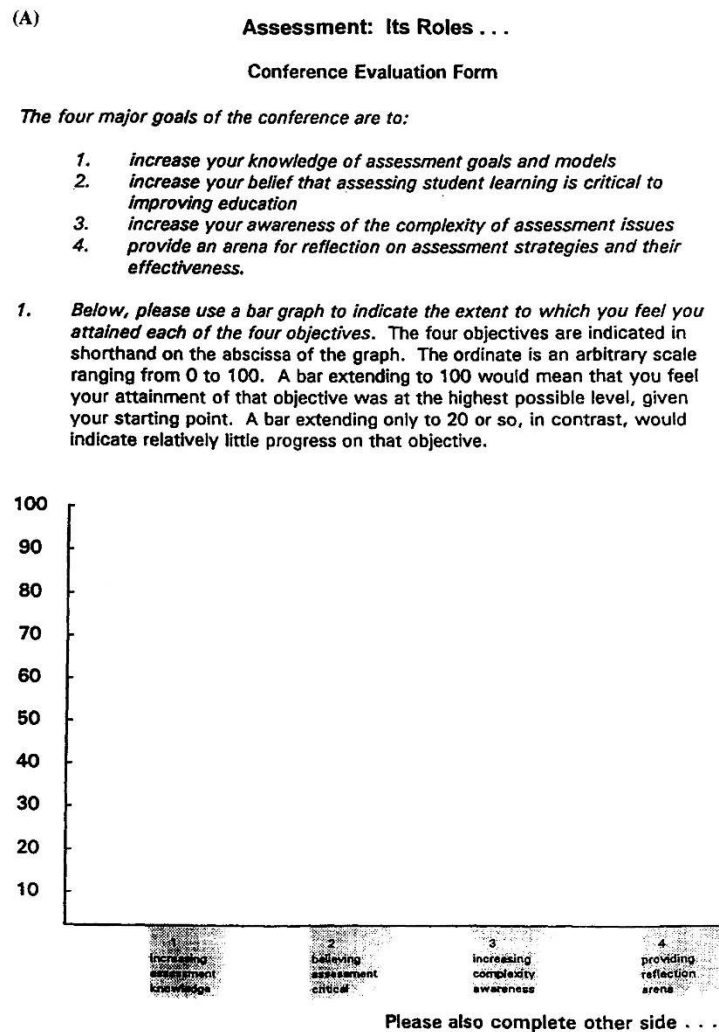
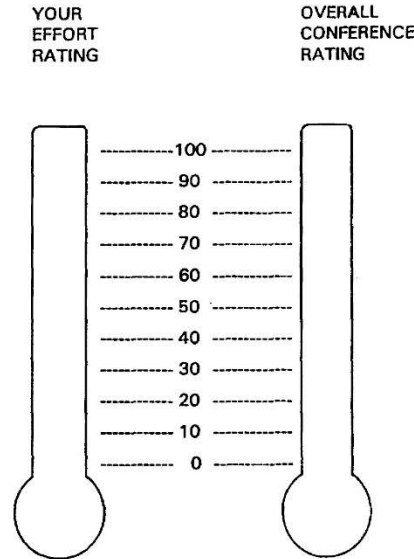


Figure 3a. Summative Evaluation Form completed by participants. (A) Side one.

2. On the two "thermometers" below, please indicate: **(B)**

- a) your rating of your own effort toward learning at this conference, and
- b) your overall rating of the conference itself.



3. To help us better report your ratings, please complete the following.

Gender:  F  M      Years Taught: \_\_\_\_\_      Years as Education Professional : \_\_\_\_\_

Current Professional Role:

Teacher (please describe role briefly) \_\_\_\_\_

School Administrator (please describe role briefly) \_\_\_\_\_

Other (please describe briefly) \_\_\_\_\_

Comments:

Thanks for your help!

Figure 3b. Summative Evaluation Form completed by participants. (B) Side two.

*Presentation of results*

In the final plenary session of the conference, the evaluators summarized the conference evaluation for the participants and presented a qualitative analysis of the results gathered by the different evaluation methods used during the conference. This immediate, formal feedback on the conference was the final element of the conference evaluation. We intended that sharing the formal feedback with participants would further reinforce the responsive and participatory nature of the evaluation, aid in removing any barriers between the evaluators and the conference participants, and provide this primary audience with timely and relevant evaluation data.

## Results and Discussion

### *Application to Future Conferences*

The interactive evaluation approach we used for this conference demonstrated a number of features that may be instructive in considering future conference evaluations. In spite of conference participants being primary beneficiaries of a conference, they are rarely asked to participate in *conducting* conference evaluations, aside from filling out summative evaluation forms. And seldom are they considered to be primary evaluation audiences. The responsive model we used allowed participants to contribute interactively in the evaluation process. Many participants paused in the conference center to read the overheads with participant comments as well as to view the photographs. Fourteen different participants actually pulled photos down from the board to write their names on the back requesting copies of particular photographs. Several participants also spontaneously made comments, both written and verbal, about the interactive nature of the evaluation. For example, one participant wrote, "Displaying comments for others to see is an excellent idea!" Displaying these different types of feedback to participants not only generated comments to the evaluators but also spurred informal discussion among participants. In a manner somewhat analogous to the often-rich discussions that occur at conferences in hotel lobbies, hallways, and restaurants, the display of comments and then others' reactions to the comments seemed to create a kind of "conversation" about the intellectual agenda of the conference.

Overall evaluation of the conference indicated that participants found the program informative, useful, and provocative. The qualitative comments gathered via interviews and open-ended forms were generally positive, with thoughtful and specific responses about individual sessions as well as the conference as a whole. In addition, the summative evaluation forms were also positive, with endorsements ranging from a mean of 68.3 (out of 100) to a mean of 97.4 on different goals of the conference. Interestingly, participants rated their own effort (86/100) slightly higher than their overall conference rating (80/100).

Although the responsive evaluation approach had many benefits for this conference, this approach also carries several risks because of its interactive nature. Participants in a conference are typically neither interviewed for their opinions about sessions immediately after they are over, nor are they provided with a large sampling of other participants' comments throughout a conference. This interactive approach enables participants not only to react to the conference itself but also to the other participants' remarks. This opens up the possibility of a "snowball" effect. If sessions are going well (as they did in this conference) and the comments are positive, this may influence the other participants to think positively about the conference. Negative comments, on the other hand, may influence participants to view the conference more negatively than if they did not know the reactions of other participants.

Our sense is that the constant interactive feedback could become overwhelming under some circumstances. Since the lines between what is being evaluated and the evaluation itself become blurred, interpretation is more difficult and the instruments may become redundant. In addition, participants who are expecting to play a more passive role may resent being asked to take on an interactive role.

In summary, this type of interactive approach to evaluation allows evaluators to participate in the conference and participants to be involved in the evaluation. This immersion effect, while possibly more cumbersome and less quantitatively exact, allows for a richer and more detailed interpretation of the successes and failures of the conference. The responsive nature of the evaluation can circumvent biases introduced by the impersonal, quantitative, post-conference nature of traditional evaluations. In addition, it provides a primary audience with important and timely feedback with their own perspective in mind. While this conference-based example was an experimental first step, it provides a basis for alternative approaches to conference evaluation.

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