3   Planning and Evaluating Events - Reference Version

Introduction

This guide offers methods and tools for planning and evaluating events for developing academic practice. This guide is part of a broader evaluation framework, and additional guides are available in the series for evaluating other academic or academic related product or service products and activities.

This is not a comprehensive guide to event planning. This guide concentrates on planning for evaluation. However, planning for evaluation turns out to have implications for many aspects of the event design and planning. These implications are explored in this guide.

The term 'event' is intended to cover workshops, courses and conferences – any meeting involving some form of briefing, training or development.

Some of what follows may already be undertaken as part of event planning. Some of it may be new. All of it needs to be done, in appropriate ways, if the unit is to get the most out of this evaluation, now and into the future.

Overview – headline questions for evaluating events

Below are the suggested headline questions. More detailed versions of each of them are suggested in subsequent sections of the guide.

The first three questions should be asked and answered during and / or at the end of the event:

1.   What did participants think of the event?
2.   What did they get out of the event – what did they learn, what new ideas did they develop - during the event?
3.   How do they plan to use what they learned?

The second two should be asked and answered some months later:

4.   How have they used what they learned?
5.   What have been the effects on (usually) student learning?

Answers to these headline questions can be used to:

- See whether, and how, the event aided the attainment of the overall aims
- Improve future events.
- Decide which events should be run in the future
- Explore relations between events and other activities and products.

Evaluation needs to be planned into events – it can't just be done afterwards.

So, taking each headline question in turn:

1. What did participants think of the event?

Current evaluation practice

At most if not all events, participants are asked what they thought of the event.

Most event evaluation questionnaires use a scale, on which respondents indicate the extent of their positive or negative reactions to particular aspects of events.

Topics / items – approximately sorted into time sequence – include publicity; information on the website; online booking form; pre-event organisation; response to individual queries; joining instructions; organisation on the day; the appropriateness of the programme; the balance between input, discussion, practical work (if applicable) and group work; event materials; catering; venue and facilities; individual sessions; and the event as a whole. These topics are sometimes expressed as questions; for example 'To what extent did this event provide you with useful information?'

Many forms also ask how the event as whole could have been improved.

Four or six-point response scales are used. Four examples:

a)   Excellent ☐   Good ☐   Satisfactory ☐   Poor ☐

b)   Poor   Excellent
        1   2   3   4

c)   Not at all   A lot
        1   2   3   4

d)   Not at all   To a great extent
        1   2   3   4   5   6

Suggestions:

on questions

- Ask questions, the answers to which you can use in planning and running future events.

- Continue to ask some questions you have asked over the years, so that you can track over time how satisfaction with your events has improved.

- Ask one or two new or different questions each time – to check how people have responded to some particular or new feature of this event, and also to keep the evaluation process fresh, for you and for participants who attend more than one of your events.

on scales

A four point scale is probably enough. (Four is probably better than five in that, with four, people can't pick the middle, neutral, response!)

This scale works well:

Poor / Low / Not much   Excellent / High / A lot (depending on the item)

1   2   3   4

You might find it useful to say, after each cluster of items, something like "Where you have indicated that something was less than excellent, please tell us how we could make it better next time."

on practical matters:

It is important to allow a few minutes at the end of the event for people to give the feedback. Not allowing time – for example, because of the wish to squeeze in a bit more content – suggests that evaluation isn't really important.

Make sure that the feedback is collected.

It is important to chase up anyone who escapes without completing the questionnaire. You need a very high response rate, as close as possible to 100%, so that you can be confident in analysing and using your feedback.

If the event has more than one session, it is worth planning to ask participants that for feedback towards the end of each session. Otherwise, as we all know from experience that, the various sessions may blur together by the end of the day.

on using the results:

This is pretty obvious. Well-received features of the event should be used where possible in future events. Suggestions for improvement should, wherever possible, be adopted.

The end-of-event 'happy sheet' can become a dead ritual, for the unit and for participants. One way to keep it alive is to show people how you have used results from previous evaluations to improve the planning of this event.

But we are interested in more than happiness. We are interested in learning. Hence headline question 2.

2. <u>What did participants get out of the event – what did they learn, what new ideas did they develop, during the event? (Including "What would you like get out of this event?")</u>

Current evaluation practice

Some units ask beforehand what participants hope to achieve by attending the event. Some also ask at the end of or after the event whether participants achieved what they wanted.

Questions asked at the end of the event address, for example 'What was the most valuable / innovative / useful / meaningful idea you gained from the event / developed during the event?' and "What particular ideas and practices are you taking away from this event?"

Sometimes participants are asked what remains unclear, and what question remains uppermost in their minds.

This is all part of good evaluation practice, particularly when maximum use is made of the answers.

Comments

Units may take a variety of approach to describing their events, and in particular to describing possible benefits of participation. Aims of events are more often specified than intended learning outcomes. There may a reluctance to describe intended learning outcomes for academics. It is not clear that such reluctance is necessary – potential or actual participants in an event may find it helpful to know what they may get out of participating.

One example below describes the intended audience and aims, and at least suggests an outcome. (The labels in italics below are added before the item to which they refer):

> *(Audience)* Laboratory demonstrators are a core part of university teaching and learning and commonly involve postgraduate students. *(Aims)* This workshop aims to give an overview of the skills expected of a demonstrator and highlight common issues relating to supporting students in the laboratory. *(Process)* The day will also provide participants with an opportunity to network with peers from other institutions and *(outcome)* further develop their own key skills, and *(Aim)* aims to complement institutional programmes offered.

Another example, similarly annotated:

> This symposium, organised by *(Context -- other organisations involved)* *(Context -- previously events)* builds on the previous ...events, by providing an opportunity for *(Audience)* teachers of ... to (*Process / Aim / Intended Outcome)* come together and creatively explore ways in which climate change issues can be incorporated into comprehensive design projects.

Suggestions:

<u>on outcomes for events and for individual participants</u>

It is good practice to suggest what participants may gain from the event; because this makes it easier to choose which event to attend, and because it makes sound evaluation easier.

> A possible revised outcome for the first example above – "Participants will be supported to identify the particular capabilities required in their own work as a demonstrator; to develop some of these capabilities; and to plan how they will develop other of these capabilities."

on event design

Clear intended outcomes also aid the planning of the event. Given clear intended outcomes, the event can be designed to help participants to:

Explore the outcome and what it means to them;

Find a version of the outcome that is appropriate to their particular context and interests; and

Achieve the outcome, or at any rate plan how they will use the ideas being explored during the event.

on questions – before the event / at the start of the event or each session

It is useful to ask people before the event what they want to get out of it. It starts them thinking about how they will use the event. If you ask people to say beforehand what they want to get out of the event, you may be able to use this to refine the way the event, and individual sessions within the event, are run.

It's good to tell people at the start of the event that they will be asked what they got out of the event. This increases the chance that you will get thoughtful answers. It will also encourage participants to think and discuss during the event how they might later use the ideas presented.

on questions – at the end of each session / at the end of the event

Possible questions on what participants gained from a session, and / or from the event as whole:

"What main benefits – for example ideas, practices, information, sources, contacts – did you gain from the event?"

"What ideas about [the workshop topic] did you develop during the day?"

on using the results:

Information about what participants wanted from the event can be used as market intelligence about possible future events.

Comparing three things – what participants wanted out of the event, what the intended outcomes of the event were, and what participants actually report getting out of the event; and then relating these to the programme and the materials; provides valuable and detailed insights into how the event worked, and thus provides a basis for planning future events that will be even more productive.

Questions about what participants got out of the event link into the next headline question, about how participants plan to use what they learned.

3. <u>How do participants plan to use what they learned?</u>

Current evaluation practice

Participants may be asked, for example, "How may you use ideas and practices from the event in your teaching?", or "What action if any, will you take as a result of today's event?" (and an excellent follow-up to this, "How can the unit support you in this?").

Again this is part of very good evaluation practice.

Comment

This guide assumes that the events to be evaluated are concerned with changes to teaching, which is taken to include all aspects of curriculum design, teaching, learning resources, support learning, feedback and assessment. It is understood that some unit events are concerned with, for example matters of policy or strategy. Policy and strategy are important insofar as they are effect practice, even if that practice is for example the production of institutional or departmental policy or strategy to reflect changes in national policy or strategy. The approach suggested in this guide also works for such events. A good event on policy and strategy encourages participants to explore the implications for their own work. It is relevant, in evaluating such an event, to find out how the event helped participants to act appropriately in their own setting, and later to identify the effects of what they did.

Suggestions:

<u>on the design and operation of events</u>

There is research evidence that participants who plan during the event how they may change their practice are in fact likely to do so (Rust, 1998)[1]. This justifies the inclusion of action planning as an activity in events, and in sessions within events.

It takes time and support for a participant to give a thoughtful and useful answer to a question such as "How will or may you change your practice using ideas from this event?" If we are to use such a question, and its use is to be productive, this has implications for the design and operation of the event.

Events, and sessions within events, are likely to be more useful if they include examples of how ideas have been applied in practice. Movement backwards and forwards between ideas / theories and practical applications, testing each against the other and using each to illuminate the other, are a fundamental feature of academic life and academic processes. These processes work equally well for improving teaching and learning.

It useful to make "How might you use some of these ideas in your teaching?" an activity within each session. This may be relatively informal, each participant making a few notes from himself; or it may involve a much more substantial process of action planning. Participants may well benefit from talking to each other about this, and sharing with the larger group some of their Ideas.

There are great advantages to building the question into each session rather than adding it on at the end. Indeed, if, as will often be the case, an intended outcome of the event or session is that participants should explore ideas and practices presented and consider how they might use them in

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[1] Rust, C. (1998). "The impact of educational development workshops on teachers' practice." <u>International Journal for Academic Development</u> **3**(1): 72-80.

their own work, then addressing this question becomes, not just something to be tacked on at the end, but an important part – perhaps the heart – of the session. This clearly has major implications for the design of events and sessions. To be clear; the aim here is not just to make evaluation easier. It is to make the event more productive for participants. This does have direct implications for the way the event is designed and run.

It is good to capture participants' plans at the event. A photocopier in or close to the room where the event is being run, or perhaps even the use of carbon paper or NCR paper, would do this.

Under headline question 4 we suggest that participants should be followed up to find out how they have in fact used what they learned. It is important that, during the event, participants are asked if they are willing to be followed up in this way. It is important that participants see this as a friendly and professional expression of interest, not as a bureaucratic exercise. In no way does this follow-up evaluate the participant – the workshop and its longer term effects are being evaluated, not the participant.

on questions

 "In what particular ways might you use ideas from this event in your teaching [or whatever was the subject of the event]?"

"Are there particular colleagues with whom it would be useful for you to share these ideas?"

 "May we contact you with some follow-up questions in [six] months?"

on using the results:

If participants plan to make particular changes to their practice, there is a reasonable chance that they will do so. Plans developed during the event, therefore, are provide a reasonable (although of course not perfect) proxy measure of the effectiveness of the event in stimulating changes to practice.

Study of participants' plans will give useful indications a likely future changes to practice, with implications for the future work and priorities of the unit.

This and the previous two questions can be asked and answered during and at the end of the event. Asking and answering these questions, and collecting, analysing and using the results, will not be free, but it will not be very expensive.

The final two headline questions have to be asked and answered some months after the event. Asking and answering them will bring significant costs and benefits.

4.   <u>How have participants used what they learned?</u>

Current evaluation practice

This question is not currently widely asked.

Suggestions:

<u>on the process</u>

You can ask about this after the event – say three to six months after, depending on what is a reasonable timescale for implementing the ideas developed during the event and when in the academic year the event is run.

At registration or during the event, you should ask participants for their permission to contact them some time after the event. The follow-up contacts can be scheduled when the event is run, and sent more-or-less automatically to everyone who agreed to be followed up.

The obvious methods are e-mail or on-line survey. A brief telephone conversation can be very productive – this is not as time-consuming as it may sound. Participants might feel it more individual and less bureaucratic if the follow-up questioning referred to what they had said they wanted to do with what they've learned at the workshop, hence the suggestion made under headline question three above of collecting participants' plans at the end of the workshop.

<u>on questions</u>

"Have you made changes to your practice using some of the ideas from the event?"

"What were those changes?"

 "Have you talked with colleagues about these changes to your practice?"

"What future changes are you considering / planning?"

This last question can lead into a market research question, which some units already ask – "What further help could the unit provide you in relation to these changes?" – although it is important that this is experienced as market research rather than as marketing.

<u>on using the results</u>

One of the two overarching aims of the work of the unit may be to support and improve teaching and learning in a particular context or discipline. The follow-up evaluation suggested here addresses the first of those aims – improvements in teaching. Information on changes made to teaching within the context or discipline provides strong evidence of the effectiveness of the work of the unit.

Beyond that, knowing the kinds of changes being made to teaching again provides valuable information to inform future events, activities, products and services from the unit. It also provides a rich picture of the frontiers of practice in the teaching of the discipline; it may suggest case studies on innovations in teaching; it may generate resources for the unit to disseminate more widely, or papers for the journal. Undertaken thoroughly, this follow-up evaluation will generate important and powerful information and understanding, information and understanding that can be used to underpin and increase the effectiveness of the unit.

Such follow-up work will of course require resource, resource which might have been applied to running other events or activities or providing other products or services. Would it be worth it? The only way to find out is to try.

5.   <u>What have been the effects on student learning?</u>

Current evaluation practice

This question is currently not widely or systematically asked.

Comments

Most academics are not pedagogic researchers or evaluators. So is it realistic to suggest that academics should be asked to identify the effects of any changes they have made on student learning?

It has to be done, if the unit is to know and show that it is succeeding in supporting the improvement of student learning.

How can it be done? To answer, that we need to go back into the design of the event.

Suggestions:

<u>on event design</u>

Sessions should:

- Show examples of the application of the ideas being explored, and

- Allow time, space and encouragement to participants to plan how they may use the ideas and practices being described and explored in the event or session.

To increase the chance that changes to teaching can be seen to lead to improvements in student learning, It would clearly also be helpful if sessions describe and illustrate:

- How the changes being described and explored in the session have affected, or are intended or likely to affect, student learning

- How the effects of the changes on student learning have been identified, or can be identified.

The person responsible for the event should check, in conversation with the presenter or facilitator, that these intended effects on student learning of the ideas and practices being discussed are clear and explicit, and that they are evaluable.

This is not simply in order to make evaluation easier. It is good educational practice to make intended outcomes, effects, explicit. A good outcome; as well as being valued within the discipline by staff and students; should be evaluable; it must be possible to see whether or not it has been attained.

<u>on evaluating the effects of the innovation on student learning</u>

This hypothetical but hopefully realistic example suggests how the effects on student learning of a new approach to teaching problem solving might be identified. It therefore suggests an approach to evaluating the effect on student learning of a unit's event on teaching problem solving.

The example is accompanied and followed by *commentary* which suggests how the approach illustrated here for problem solving can be applied to other topics.

This event suggests that the main stages in problem solving are:

- Analysing initial problem statements

- Where appropriate refining these statements

- Undertaking research

- Developing and describing alternative solution approaches

- Establishing criteria for judging solution approaches and solutions

- Selecting one or more particular solution approaches

- Implementing a chosen solution approach

- Evaluating the solution

- Communicating the solutions

At each stage the student should be able to justify decisions made and steps taken.

(Perhaps surprisingly, it does not matter what approach to teaching problem solving the event is advocating. We simply need to note that students should be capable in each of the above stages; should apply them in an integrated way to a particular problem; and should justify their decisions and actions at each stage.)

During the event, under the guidance of the event leader or facilitator, a lecturer participating in the event plans and discusses with others how they can apply this approach to their own teaching of problem solving in their own work.

Later, the lecturer teaches problem-solving broadly in the way suggested in the event, with some necessary changes to reflect disciplinary, programme and institutional circumstances.

How to evaluate the effects of this new approach on student learning?

Through the normal processes of assessing student work, the lecturer identifies how good students are; at each stage of problem-solving, at undertaking the stages in an integrated and coherent way, and in justifying their decisions and actions at each stage.

Very often, evaluation of efforts to improve student learning can use data on student performance, data gained through normal processes of assessment. What we might call 'evaluation through assessment' has one huge advantage – assessment is done anyway, and so the need for a whole layer of additional evaluation is removed. The only additional requirement for evaluation based on student work is some analysis of that student work. This is not a trivial requirement, but it is much less demanding than a full research or evaluation study.

If the lecturer has taught problem-solving previously, to similar students, it may be possible to compare the work of students taught in the old and the new way.

Such an evaluation does not prove the effectiveness of the new teaching approach, certainly not to the standard of proof with which scientists, technologists and mathematicians are comfortable in their discipline. However, education;; is a social rather than a natural science. A lower standard of proof necessarily applies, mainly because of the sheer complexity of people acting in social settings and the huge number of variables and interactions involved.

If the evaluation suggested here shows that students exposed to the new teaching method have developed and demonstrated the specified capabilities, it would feel like a success for the new method - crudely, the method works. If the students were seen to do better than those taught by previous methods, then it would be legitimate; with whatever cautions were felt to be necessary; to claim that the new method worked better than the old.

on implications for the unit

It may be helpful for a unit to identify a member of staff who will lead on pedagogic evaluation, at least to the extent that they are able to advise and support session facilitators and thereby academics seeking to evaluate the effects of teaching innovations.

Not all events are directly concerned with innovations in teaching. Nonetheless, the approach suggested here to evaluation – identify the intended outcomes, the intended effects on practice, of whatever is the subject of the event, and then identify how far these intended outcomes have been achieved – is a sound basis for most evaluations.

on using the results

This follows directly, indeed obviously, from the comments on using the results from headline question 4. The other overarching aim of the work of the unit is to support and improve learning. The follow-up evaluation suggested here addresses improvements in learning. Information on improvements in learning provides strong evidence of the effectiveness of the work of the unit.

In the example here, the effects on student learning were determined by the lecturer who had participated in an event, and as a result had made and investigated the effects of changes to their practice. It is important to have a channel through which these results can be fed back to the unit, otherwise the unit will not know the effects of its work on student learning. How to achieve this?

Lecturers who have been willing to be asked how they have implemented ideas learned or developed in the event, as discussed above headline question 4, may also be willing to tell the unit the results of such evaluations as are suggested here. They may be encouraged to do this by the prospect of publication of a note on their work on the unit's website, and perhaps as part of a collection of case studies. Other methods for locating and disseminating results may need to be found.

Again this evaluation and dissemination will not be free. Again they are fundamental to the unit showing that it is achieving what it intends to achieve – contributing to improving student learning. Again, in understanding how the design of a unit's event design affects participants' willingness and ability to make and evaluate changes to their practice, the unit learns to increase the effectiveness of its own work.

Conclusion

The suggestions made here attempt to build a bridge from the current unit's evaluation practice into a more thorough approach to evaluation. This more thorough approach is intended to increase the unit's knowledge and understanding of how their work contributes to their primary aims, to the improvement of teaching and to the improvement of student learning in their discipline. This increased knowledge and understanding is in turn intended to enable Subject Centres to increase their effectiveness, and also their efficiency.

These suggestions will involve additional work by a unit. The approach has been designed to minimise this additional work – but it cannot be eliminated entirely.

<u>Meta data</u>

The following table describes information about this resource (meta data) which is also used to locate the resource using search tools. Please note the terms and conditions of use under the Creative Commons licence associated with the use of this resource.

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	The creative commons versions of these guides were created in collaboration between David Baume and Paul Chin (pac67@bath.ac.uk) at the University of Bath, who is happy to be contacted for advice on using and adapting the Evaluation Framework for evaluation of other activities.
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