

Responsive Information Gathering

Using Culturally Responsive Approaches

Creating the story for the program, establishing the focus of the inquiry, and designing the scaffolding are the initial essential steps in developing the evaluation plan. In this section, we describe three approaches to evaluation that are congruent with our values, identify methods for collecting data and offer suggestions for adapting them for our communities

We have learned through the academic system to view evaluation from a negative perspective. It's always a deficit model. It's always starting from, "What's wrong with this picture? What's wrong with this student?" We forget that kids come to school with this prior knowledge, with this prior experience, never as a blank slate. People often say that children and students are empty vessels that have to be filled. When we look at evaluation from that perspective, there is something wrong with the student, there is something wrong with the program, there is something wrong with the community. The strengths that are there aren't seen. Our vision of what is going on gets clouded by that kind of perspective, and we miss what is really important, what is really building there or becoming.

Focus Group Participant, Phoenix

As noted by a participant in a focus group, evaluation is often focused on a deficit or problem-based model of community development. Methods used to gather information on individual and community growth have failed to capture cultural or personal strengths. The AIHEC Indigenous Evaluation Framework should serve as a rudder to steer assessment and other data gathering activities towards our own considerations of how to understand the truth of a situation or setting.



Passing the Paddle, WINHEC 2008 Annual Meeting, Melbourne, Australia

"Our vision of what is going on gets clouded by a deficit model of perspective, and we miss what is really important, what is really building there or becoming."

Focus Group Participant



Haskell Indian Nations University Students

*Through appreciative inquiry,
we examine what is working
and our strengths.*

Looking to Our Strengths—Appreciative Inquiry

In the AIHEC Indigenous Evaluation Framework, we look to our strengths as a starting point for examining programs in our communities. We should promote affirmative processes for gathering data that stress strengths rather than weaknesses or problems. In doing so, we can use elements of a Western model called appreciative inquiry (AI). The AI process “**inquires into, identifies, and further develops the best of what is in an organization in order to create a better future.**”²⁹ A basic premise of AI is that organizations will move toward what they study.

The AI approach to gathering information focuses on what is good and strong and explores what may be needed to build on strengths. It encourages the following types of evaluative statements or questions to guide inquiry:

- In looking at your experience in this program, describe a time when you felt most alive, most fulfilled, or most excited. As you share your story, consider what made it a high point, who was involved, what made it a good experience.
- Let’s talk for a moment about some things you value deeply—specifically, about the things you value about yourself, your performance, your work, or this program.
- What do you experience as the core values and practices that give life to this program?
- If you could have three wishes for this program, what would you wish and how would the program be different if they came true?³⁰

²⁹ Coghlan, A., Preskill, H., & Tzavaras Catsambas, T., “An Overview to Appreciative Inquiry in Evaluation,” in *New Directions for Evaluation*, no. 11, Winter, American Evaluation Association, Fairhaven, MA, Wiley Periodicals, Inc., Wilmington, DE, co-pubs., 2003, p. 5.

³⁰ There is a good discussion and case studies on AI in the *New Directions for Evaluation*, vol. 100, Winter 2003, Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, CA.

Building Capacity—Empowerment Evaluation

Community engagement builds capacity in conducting evaluation and encourages ownership of the process. It creates an understanding of the importance of evaluation as a component of program implementation. Capacity is greatly enhanced when community members are directly engaged in conducting evaluation.

Another Western evaluation approach, Empowerment Evaluation is consistent with the AIHEC Indigenous Evaluation Framework. The CIRCLE Project evaluation on the Pine Ridge reservation used elements of empowerment evaluation and participatory action research models. Empowerment evaluation is designed to foster program improvement and self-determination by asking program participants (staff, clients, and other stakeholders) to help themselves through self-evaluation and reflection. It relies on both qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

Empowerment evaluation is necessarily a collaborative group activity, not an individual pursuit. An evaluator does not and cannot empower anyone; people empower themselves, often with assistance and coaching. This process is fundamentally democratic. It invites (if not demands) participation, examining issues of concern to the entire community in an open forum.



Ki-Yo Powwow at University of Montana

Reference

See Readings, "Indigenizing Evaluation Research."

As a result, the context changes. The assessment of a program's value and worth is not the end point of the evaluation—as it often is in traditional [Western] evaluation—but part of an ongoing process of program improvement. This new context acknowledges a simple but overlooked truth: that merit and worth are not static values. Populations shift, goals shift, knowledge about program practices and their value changes, and external forces are highly unstable. By internalizing and institutionalizing self-evaluation processes and practices, a dynamic and responsive approach to evaluation can be developed to accommodate these shifts.³¹

In empowerment evaluation, the evaluator serves as a coach or facilitator, guiding the program stakeholders through a series of steps. These three steps are: (1) establishing a mission or vision statement, i.e., identifying the results stakeholders would like to see coming out of program implementation; (2) taking stock or determining where the program stands, including identifying strengths and weaknesses; and (3) charting a course for the future, including stating goals and strategies with an emphasis on program improvement, as well as identifying the documentation required to monitor progress toward achieving the results stakeholders want to see.³²

Empowerment evaluation has three key features that fuse the task of evaluation with that of capacity building:

I. Helps create a constructive environment for the evaluation.

Community members are co-discoverers, along with the evaluator, of knowledge about the merits of the program. Because steps are outlined to make improvements to the program, any negative findings are dealt with before there

³¹ Fetterman, D.M., Kaftarian, S.J., & Wandersman, A., eds., *Empowerment Evaluation: Knowledge and Tools for Self-Assessment and Accountability*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA, 1966, p. 5.

³² In its earlier conceptualization, empowerment evaluation used four steps: taking stock, setting goals, developing strategies, and documenting progress.

might be negative consequences for the funders or other authorities. As the emphasis is on program improvement, the evaluation should identify constructive partnership roles for the funders and other supporters.

2. Voices of the intended beneficiaries are actively included.

Community members' voices give a sense of legitimacy to the inquiry; often, if the evaluation process does not pass muster with those who are supposed to benefit, findings can be dismissed as illegitimate. In this way, the experience, wisdom and community standards of excellence are acknowledged.

3. Communities use the evaluation findings to strengthen community responses.

The lessons learned are spread throughout the community in various forums and media. This helps create links among people and other programs that can also use the information. The evaluation will help the community members strengthen the commitment they bring to their work, further develop their skills to make their work more effective, as well as increase the financial and other resources usable to strengthen their work.³³

The description of the empowerment evaluation implementation described in the table on page 84 identifies principles of this approach. These principles are congruent with the core values of AIHEC Indigenous Evaluation Framework.

³³ Mayer, S. E., "Building Community Capacity With Evaluation Activities That Empower," in *Empowerment Evaluation: Knowledge and Tools for Self-assessment & Accountability*, edited by D. M. Fetterman, S. Kaftarian, & A. Wandersman, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA, 1996, p. 335-336.

Empowerment Evaluation³⁴

PROCESS:

- A community should make the decisions about all or most aspects of an evaluation, including its purpose and design; a community should decide how the results are used (community-ownership principle).
- Stakeholders, including staff members, community members, funding institutions, and program participants should directly participate in decisions about an evaluation (inclusion principle).
- Empowerment evaluation should value processes that emphasize deliberation and authentic collaboration among stakeholders; the empowerment evaluation process should be readily transparent (democratic participation principle).
- The tools developed for an empowerment evaluation should reflect community wisdom (community-knowledge principle).
- Empowerment evaluations must appreciate the value of scientific evidence (evidence-based strategies principle).
- Empowerment evaluations should be conducted in ways that hold evaluators accountable to program administrators and to the community or public (accountability principle).

OUTCOME:

- Empowerment evaluations must value improvement; evaluations should be tools to achieve improvement (improvement principle).
- Empowerment evaluations should change programmatic behaviors and influence individual thinking (organizational-learning principle).
- Empowerment evaluations should facilitate the allocation of resources, opportunities, and bargaining power; evaluations should contribute to the amelioration of social inequalities (social-justice principle).
- Empowerment evaluations should facilitate organizations' and communities' use of data to learn and their ability to sustain their evaluation efforts (capacity-building principle).

³⁴ Miller, R. L. & Campbell, R. „Taking Stock of Empowerment Evaluation: An Empirical Review,” in *American Journal of Evaluation*, vol. 27 no. 3, September 2006.

Indigenous evaluation is by its nature a capacity building exercise. It is a framing and reframing process. As we explore and test ways to bring our values and beliefs into evaluation, we are building our capacities to own the practice of creating knowledge to go forward into the future. Similar to the principles outlined on page 86, two core principles of the AIHEC Indigenous Evaluation Framework are to broaden the role of community in the evaluation and to base the evaluation process on commonly held cultural values.

Similar to appreciative inquiry (AI) and empowerment evaluation, the AIHEC Indigenous Evaluation Framework encourages a focus on what works, which can then be examined to determine why it works and what is needed to maintain or increase the activities or behaviors that work. One Indigenous evaluator used a method of environmental scanning to examine those factors that facilitated program performance and success, then identified what factors were inhibiting program accomplishment. By identifying such facilitators and inhibitors, the program staff were then able to ensure that those facilitating factors were strengthened and that the inhibiting factors were handled in a way that they ceased to be problematic. This approach created a balance which made program staff aware of their strong points and identified areas that threatened program success.

Indigenous evaluation should lead us toward understanding how our cultural, community, and program strengths can move us forward. AI should be explored, and its philosophy incorporated into methods for gathering data. It affirms a tenet of Indigenous ways of knowing by recognizing the inter-relationship or co-creation of program knowledge through the interaction of evaluation with implementation. By using evaluation to help focus on our gifts and strengths, we are following the wisdom of the Lakota elder (quoted earlier) who said: **“When we followed the wisdom of the Lakota ways we flourished!”**



Institute of American Indian Arts

Recognizing Our Gifts—Performance-based Student Assessment



Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute Students



Browning High School Student Project

Perhaps one of the more damaging experiences Native peoples have with evaluation is the use of assessments such as national or state standardized tests measuring academic achievement. These tests are often the only measures of student achievement considered when assessing student learning and are widely reported in federal and state educational statistics. Unfortunately, Indian and Alaskan Natives' scores are lower than most other groups. Given state and federal mandates in education, the use of some type of assessment instrument likely will continue. Many Indian educators, as well as the National Indian Education Association, have stated their concern with the reliance on standardized testing with Indian students, and thus, promote the notion that assessment should be expanded to ensure that our evaluations capture a full range of gifts and talents and do not rely only on limited state or national standardized tests. As noted earlier in the discussion of common values, we must address assessment in ways that respect the full dignity of our students. We need to emphasize that:

The duty of all people is to assist others on their paths, and to be patient when their acts or words demonstrate that there are still things to be learned. The corollary duty is to avoid discouraging people by belittling them in any fashion and so reducing their respect and faith in themselves.³⁵

In a statewide study of Alaskan Native student vitality, researchers interviewed Native Alaskan leaders, community members, and elders to learn how they defined Native student success. They learned that success engaged individual traits, skills in bridging two worlds, and ability to contribute to the community.

³⁵ Rupert Ross, p. 27.

They talked about individual success, about succeeding in bridging two worlds, and success in a community context. Most consistently, however, participants' own definitions of success centered on what it means to be a good human being. For these participants, a successful Alaskan Native student is one who can set and achieve goals because he knows his own worth and value, understands his responsibility to his community, and is prepared to pursue whatever life path he chooses.³⁶

Since the 1980s, many educators have expressed dissatisfaction with the use of standardized tests as the primary indicator of student achievement. For more than 20 years, there has been a movement to create alternative educational assessment techniques and use of these techniques is becoming more widespread.³⁷ Among these alternative methods known as performance-based assessments, authentic assessment is the most widely known. It was developed by educators seeking forms of student work that reflected real-life situations, as well as strategies that challenged a student's ability to demonstrate what he or she had learned. The educators were interested in identifying an assessment system that provides information about specific tasks in which a student succeeds or fails—tasks that in, and of themselves, are worthwhile, significant, and meaningful. Performance-based assessment strategies may be more culturally responsive, as they are similar to traditional ways in which Indigenous communities have measured accomplishments.

In using performance-based assessment, students are asked to perform real-world tasks that demonstrate meaningful application of essential knowledge and skills. Student performance is typically scored on a rubric to determine how successfully the student has met specific standards.³⁸



College of Menominee Nation Chemistry Lab

The newer approaches to assessment in the education arena are reflections of values and practices that informed our traditional ways of assessing merit or accomplishments as they are based on performance and account for the variety of ways in which an individual can demonstrate his or her unique gifts.

³⁶ Villegas, M., & Prieto, R., "Alaska Native Student Vitality: Community Perspectives on Supporting Student Success," Alaska Native Policy Center at First Alaskans Institute, Anchorage, AK, 2006, p. 1.

³⁷ The National Coalition of Essential Schools is a good resource: www.essentialschools.org.

³⁸ An excellent discussion of authentic assessment, is Jon Mueller, "Authentic Assessment Tool Box," <http://jonathan.mueller.faculty.noctrl.edu/toolbox/index.htm>.

FRAMEWORK

Responsive Information Gathering



Sitting Bull College Environmental Studies

Performance-based assessment fits well with the Indigenous valuing of the unique gifts of every person. It provides an opportunity for a student to demonstrate what he or she knows and can do. The newer approaches to assessment in the education arena are reflections of values and practices that informed our traditional ways of assessing merit or accomplishments as they are based on performance and account for the variety of ways in which an individual can demonstrate his or her unique gifts.

In developing a performance-based assessment tool the following process is used:

- Determine what students know and are able to do;
- Establish standards for knowledge and skills. What is the level of proficiency needed to meet the standard;
- Develop authentic tasks that will demonstrate performance;
- Establish criteria for a range of performance levels and describe this range in a rubric, a list describing different levels of proficiency with the final level being the desired standard that students should meet; and
- Establish whether the student met the standard from a score on a rubric, and if not, determine how to help the student improve.

This approach can be used to assess both academic and cultural learning. Scoring is flexible and can be assigned to elders, members of the community, or educators. It also moves away from strictly using tests and fits well into Indigenous education models where learning is demonstrated through doing.

The use of portfolios that show samples of each student's work is another performance-based assessment method. For example, portfolios are used to show examples of how a student's work has

improved and his/her skills have grown. This practice is consistent with Indigenous values, as it showcases the various talents and gifts of students. A portfolio is a collection of a student's work which is “specifically selected to tell a particular story about the student.”³⁹ It is not just a large collection of work completed by a student, but a carefully selected sample of work. The portfolio should be developed to celebrate each student's gifts; it can demonstrate worth without requiring uniformity on all elements to be showcased.

Assessments that engage youth in creative activities are powerful indicators of learning. A program in Minnesota, designed to prevent tobacco abuse, used an innovative participatory action method developed by Caroline Wang called Photovoice.⁴⁰ The youth were given cameras and asked to take pictures that illustrated messages regarding tobacco dependency. Their pictures were rich in stories and lessons. One showed a woman so desperate to smoke that she is leaning over the burner on her stove to light her cigarette. Another pictured a pile of cigarette butts in an ashtray. One set of photos depicted pictures of children dancing at a powwow with the message of protecting them from tobacco smoke so they can grow up and carry on tribal traditions. Another photo showed one drummer lighting up and



Sisseton Wahpeton College Children's Program



³⁹ J. Mueller, Ibid.

⁴⁰ For more information on Photovoice, see www.photovoice.com.



Rich White, United Tribes Technical College

commenting that most others at the drum would soon follow his lead and start smoking cigarettes. In the Photovoice technique, both the pictures and the youths' written stories of reasons they chose to take each photograph were used to assess their learning. A set of the photos was then made into a calendar that included information about traditional uses for tobacco and contemporary facts related to abuse of tobacco.

Linking Assessment and Culture

Science fairs are common demonstrations of authentic learning practiced in many of our schools. One focus group participant shared the following story to illustrate an important lesson.

I was at a native science fair. . . . To enter that particular competition, the students' projects had to be culturally relevant in thought, not only the subject but in design and how they thought about it and what was its purpose and place. One young man had a project about corn and corn grinding. He compared the traditional method with newer machines for corn grinding. It was a wonderful project. In his hypothesis, he was looking at productivity and trying to determine which produces more [corn meal]. But in his design, which included interviewing the elders, interviewing the corn grinders who are typically women, he ended up learning, as a young male, how to sing the songs, the corn grinding songs (which the women sing while grinding). He looked at the way that there was not one stone that they used for grinding, there were four of them, and they each passed on that corn to the others. They would do this part, and then the next person do the next stage and the third stage and the fourth stage, and in that bonding, they sang their songs together and they connected, and he learned so much about that.

We asked him about his song. He said that he had videotaped the women, and he asked them questions about the impact and the meaning of the song. Then he said, "It's not about productivity. I

thought it was. But it's really about connectedness to the land." He knew the history and where the corn came from and how he inherited that. He knew the songs. He learned the songs with it. He learned the process. He knew that it was much better to stay connected. How they used it for prayer, and how they used it in their food. He was so wonderful in his project.

I asked, "What is it you want to say to your people? What is your research? How would you tell them?" He said, "I'd tell them, 'Get rid of those machines. You don't need them. What you need is a way that you communicate to each other and you stay connected to that process, and we shouldn't lose that.'" It was not just the fact that he knew science; they all knew the Western science method of preparing for the science fair. But they could think about it in terms of how to approach it and teach it with reverence and respect, and how could you be a change agent in that sense. To other people, to the Western thinkers, it would have been about productivity and how to get more from that corn. And he could get more. He could see that scientifically, but what was being lost was that connection to our place and what we needed to do in our purpose for life.

Focus Group Participant, Phoenix

In the focus groups, many Native people explained that to determine merit or worth one needed to learn how to become a good person and to live up to the talents that one is given, while also giving back to family and community. Finding one's foundation and seeking balance and harmony are consistent themes. In conducting evaluations, we need to seek ways in which these qualities are assessed. The story of the young science fair student illustrates how he came to understand values within his culture. By being asked, "What do you want to say to your people?" he was challenged to think about sharing what he learned. Indigenous evaluation embraces assessment practices that include using elders to review and comment on student or program participant performance. Programs that engage students in educational activities that involve learning about



National Museum of the American Indian Opening Ceremonies



Taora Royal Smudging, WINHEC 2008 Annual Meeting Opening Ceremony, Melbourne, Australia



Smudging Fire, WINHEC 2008 Annual Meeting, Melbourne, Australia

the local area should be encouraged to share findings with tribal councils or other groups in the community. Assessment should be more than evaluating individual growth. It should also include ways to measure and demonstrate benefits to the group or community.

Setting a Proper Tone and Respecting Cultural Protocols

Much of the time involved in conducting an evaluation involves collecting information using various methods such as interviews, surveys, tests, or observations. A list from a National Science Foundation evaluation handbook describes the advantages and disadvantages of the different methods. However, we believe that Indigenous evaluation should consider ways to incorporate cultural appropriate practices into any of the methods for gathering information. In this section, we discuss how cultural protocols that establish respectful communications should be used in evaluation.

In traditional Western evaluation practice, the role of the evaluator is to make judgments regarding relative merit or worth of a program. However, in the discussion of Empowerment Evaluation, it was noted that the role of the evaluator is that of a coach or facilitator among various stakeholders. Similarly, a primary role of the Indigenous evaluator is to serve as a facilitator to assist stakeholders in making the journey toward knowledge creation. In this way, the evaluator engages the community of stakeholders and, together, they are co-creators of evaluation knowledge.

Cultural Discussion Protocols

As Indigenous evaluators and educators, we recognize that each of our cultures has traditional methods for discussing various topics. We also recognize that the ways in which community members talk to

Reference

See Resources, "Methods for Gathering Information" from the National Science Foundation and Cultural Considerations table for Gathering Information.

one another often differ from those of the non-Indian communities which might be adjacent to us. We can use our ways of talking to one another, based on our cultural norms and values, to facilitate evaluation.

A focus group participant from a Pueblo tribe offered this discussion protocol as an example of how an Indigenous evaluation conversation might start:

In our traditional ways, community deliberations are guided toward coming to consensus. After opening with a traditional prayer asking the Creator and ancestors for guidance, we then proceed through a set of questions that respectfully ask:

1. “Why are we here?” To establish the discussion purposes.
2. “What are we going to talk about?” To establish the issues under discussion; or “What is the work we have before us?” To clarify expectations.
3. “How are we going to work together?” To establish a common understanding of the approach and strategies to be used in order to clarify any questions about how to proceed.
4. “What do you think about this?” which provides each participant an opportunity to say, “This is how I feel,” “This is how I see things,” or “It seems to me.”
5. Ultimately, the questions move the dialogue from “How do you feel?” to “How do we feel?” To move toward consensus.

For an Indigenous evaluation purpose, this method of discourse might be used over several focus group sessions to allow for building consensus about various aspects of the program evaluation or for allowing people to express differing viewpoints in a respectful manner.



*AIHEC 2007 Stick Game Competition,
Fort Belknap College*

Setting the tone of the discussion is important in Indigenous evaluation. The use of cultural protocols—such as the opening prayer—and the use of **respectful language** are based on tribal behavioral norms. These may differ from tribe to tribe. It is the evaluator’s role to be familiar with these. For example, in many Pueblo communities, a person should preface his conversation with the Native equivalent of the term *with your permission* before addressing stakeholders.

Timing of evaluation conversations is also critical. The evaluator must search for potential evaluative openings within the conversation to elicit further information that may provide particular insights to the group. It may be considered rude to ask a number of questions, especially if the information being sought can be considered as soliciting criticism or negative perspectives. The evaluative discussion may proceed organically, rather than through a linear set of questions, as is the case in most Western focus group directions. We have a responsibility to engage the evaluation conversation within the protocols appropriate to the community and to our goals for the evaluation.

Talking Circles

The use of the Talking Circle—while not a specifically Pueblo discussion protocol—is also another Indigenous practices that can be adapted to an evaluation purpose. One Indigenous evaluator used the Talking Circle process to elicit information from individuals in a group setting. In this technique, the evaluator may pose a question to participants who then may respond in sequence around-the-circle or may choose to pass until they feel confident they can answer substantively. Participants are not pressured to respond and everyone is given a chance to respond as the discussion moves around the

Reference

See Elder Knowledge, page 78.



circle. Sometimes, a talking stick or a feather is used to signify who has the opportunity to speak; once that person has spoken, he/she may pass the stick on to the next person or ask, “who wants to speak next?” and the stick is passed to that person.

Another Indigenous evaluator in New Mexico used meetings with extended family groups as a culturally appropriate way to collect information for one project. In the past, when door-to-door surveys had failed to elicit substantive information, large community meetings were tried, however, they drew little attendance or turned negative. It was determined that going to extended families was a more effective way to elicit the information needed by the project for its evaluation.



WINHEC 2008 Annual Meeting Opening Greetings, Melbourne, Australia

Visiting—A Culture-based Data Gathering Method

One Indigenous evaluator in Montana is developing a culturally appropriate way of collecting information. In developing her methodology, she and her evaluation team asked themselves, “How did we traditionally go about getting information when our communities needed it?” They rediscovered visiting, i.e., relatives would go from house-to-house visiting, discussing the subject that concerned the community, and coming to degrees of consensus on how to handle the subject. The team will use visiting as a method to collect data for their evaluation.

Holiday Gathering, Fort Berthold
Community College, 2007



Dr. Iris PrettyPaint described *Aoksisawaatsiiyo’p*, the Blackfoot Visiting Methodology, which emerged from the Blackfoot Project, or *Ihto’tsii Kipaitapiiwahsinnoon* (Coming from Within):

This collaborative initiative includes 49 members of the Blackfoot Confederacy, over half of whom are women. The primary purpose of the project is to increase the number of Blackfoot Confederacy members in graduate school. The Project is interested in doing collaborative tribal community-based research to complete degree requirements and use Indigenous methods for data collection and analysis. The project identified four core research issues, including the rediscovery of Blackfoot inherent values, particularly the Blackfoot language; the acknowledgement of traumatic stress, which permeates the fabric of Blackfoot families and communities; and the limitations of the political system to strengthen the Blackfoot people.

Built on the foundation of the Blackfoot culture, the Blackfoot Visiting Methodology (*Aoksisawaatsiiyo’p*) extends beyond Western qualitative inquiry to explore the Blackfoot speaking voices that inform a deep understanding of the language, land, history, meaningful relationships and a sense of place. We recognized the importance of selecting a method that matches our core research issues, forms of analysis and the way we want findings presented.

The Blackfoot Visiting Methodology recognizes the interconnectedness of families and the natural process of building rapport to discuss sensitive issues. This Indigenous method promises to identify community based interventions that are sustainable because they have been developed with community engagement. Further development will enhance the scientific rigor of the method and improve the project’s ability to study, understand, and rectify complex community research issues.

Dr. Iris PrettyPaint

Considerations in Conducting Surveys, Interviews, and Focus Groups

The most common methods for collecting data are surveys to be filled out by a person, interviews (which can follow a survey structure or be open-ended), or focus groups. To become responsive Indigenous evaluators, we need to continually consider how our communities operate and to ensure that we respect community norms and values when using these methods. In this section, we offer suggestions based on information shared at the focus groups and from the experiences of Indigenous evaluators.

Determine Who Should Provide Information or Where or When to Collect Information

Selecting the people who will provide information is important. A good evaluation carefully considers the number of people who provide information and the criteria used to select the sources of information. Various quantitative assessments of student or participant knowledge gained through participating in a program, or via a questionnaire rating satisfaction, might be collected from all program participants. However, in programs that have large numbers of participants, it is possible to collect information from a smaller portion of those engaged in the program. This smaller group is called a sample of the population. Samples are used for both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods.

Different strategies may be used to select a sample population from which to collect information. Some evaluation designs require use of random selection. Even a qualitative method such as interviewing could rely on a random process to choose who will be interviewed. However, qualitative methods usually rely on purposeful sampling. This type of sample is defined by criteria to select the best set of people to include when collecting data.

Data Gathering

- *Use community members*
- *Expect the unexpected*
- *Use responsive consent processes*
- *Construct questions carefully*
- *Take your time*
- *Build relationships*
- *Consider language issues*

The criteria for determining from whom and when information is collected should make sense for the program and should be designed to generate information from a good representation of participants. For example, a program serving youth in a summer educational camp may want to include both those youth who completed the summer-long programs as well as a few people who dropped out before the camp ended. Choosing times and locations in which to do interviews, focus groups, or observations is also an aspect of sampling and should be based on criteria to ensure the data collected provides a fair view of the program.

Understand The Community

Individuals preparing and conducting interviews and surveys should have a knowledge and understanding of the community and culture. Often different discourse styles exist between non-Indians and Indians in response times, vocabulary, and protocol. Non-community members conducting interviews or surveys could be viewed as rude or abrupt if they did not spend enough time establishing rapport with those being interviewed. However, some interviewers could be viewed as taking more time than necessary. Interviewing styles truly depend on the community and its particular culture.

Involve Community People

People from the community should be used whenever possible. However, it is important that interviewers be trained in conducting the interviews or surveys. They should be given consistent information on the purpose of the survey or interview so that they can build a common understanding of the reasons for the data collection. They also must be able to assure those interviewed or responding to a survey how the data will be used and the way in which confidentiality will be protected.

Allow Time to Establish Relationship

Taking time to make personal contact is often needed to establish a relationship. If an evaluator plans to disseminate a survey form, it is important that some prior contact has been made so that community people are aware of the survey and understand why it is being conducted. If the evaluator or interviewer is not from the community, it is good practice to have an introduction to the people in the community. A letter from the tribal leadership sent to households explaining the purpose of the evaluation or the survey can sometimes alleviate this problem.

Take Care in Constructing and Asking Questions

Evaluators must not include certain value-laden questions in a survey. These questions may not be answered, or they may generate incorrect feedback and endanger the validity of the data. Some evaluators, when working in non-Indian communities, may use questions that are intended to create internal checks to ensure validity. In Indian communities, such questions may be viewed as misleading and dishonest and should be used with care, if at all.

Often, in tribal communities the use of direct questioning is discouraged when interviewing community members:

One of the things I think is important in a community when you're doing interviewing is to engage the community in dialogue. . . . if you're interviewing someone, you have to allow them to guide the dialogue. . . . Let them tell you what's important. You shouldn't decide what's important for them. They're the ones who should set the agenda and tell you what's important. Don't assume that you have all the right questions. In fact, one of the things that you might be looking for is the right questions. The most valuable thing you come out with might be the ability to ask the right questions. It's respecting the fact that members of the community

"One of the things I think is important in a community when you're doing interviewing is to engage the community in dialogue. . . . if you're interviewing someone, you have to allow them to guide the dialogue. . . . Let them tell you what's important."

Focus Group Participant

have knowledge and trying your best to understand the knowledge that they're going to impart. Make them the teachers [not you].

Focus Group Participant, Phoenix

The issue of what types of questions are most useful from an Indigenous evaluation perspective is important. One Indian evaluator, when working in his own community, wanted to use forced-choice items rather than open-ended questions to make the data analysis a simpler task. He even attempted to have his program workgroup, which consisted of community members, help with developing potential responses, and he included a section for a response of Other, with space to provide an answer not contained in the given choices. In keeping with the value of centrality of community and family, the group consensus was that it was very important to give community members the opportunity to provide the answers they wanted to give and that the forced-choice would constrain them. The open-ended survey resulted in an abundance of responses, with some respondents providing attachments to the survey to clarify their answers. Analyzing this information became much more time consuming, but ultimately it was a more valuable experience.

Finally, consider how to avoid using a question/answer format. Explore ways to engage in conversation without having to focus on a question type protocol. Using evaluative statements such as those illustrated in the section Creating Our Story should be considered. This may be especially important when seeking information from elders and traditional leaders.

Consider Language Issues

Factors that may appear straightforward and non-controversial need to be addressed. For example, make certain that Native



language terms are correct and spelled in such a way as to be understandable. Many examples exist where an evaluator misspelled the name of the tribe or language. It is important to have Native language speakers conduct the interviews or surveys in some Indian communities, especially when dealing with elders.

Use Responsive Consent Processes

Evaluation may be subject to review from an Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the tribal level or at the college. The article “Researching Ourselves Back to Life” describes tribal review processes. If the evaluation does not go through a formal IRB, it is important to ensure that all those providing information give their consent for the information to be used in the evaluation. However, when seeking consent, there are a number of issues to consider.

In Western evaluation practice, signed consent forms are usually required to assure that respondents have a clear understanding of the purpose of the interview or survey. In all cases, preliminary consent—before the interview or survey—should be sought. In general, formal consent processes required by universities or federal agencies mandate that a person sign a form explaining the purpose of the evaluation, reasons for the interview, assurances of confidentiality of the identity of the interviewee, and contact information for the people responsible for the evaluation.

These formal regulations do not always apply when interviewing and interpreting information in Native communities. For example, evaluators in Alaska found that noting yourself, your family, and homeland are important in Native cultures. When gathering stories from Alaskan Natives, many wanted to have their names attached to their stories. They believed their stories of resilience in maintaining a



Fort Belknap College Students

Reference

See Readings, “Researching Ourselves Back to Life: Taking Control of the Research Agenda in Indian Country.”



Deborah His Horse Is Thunder, National Museum of the American Indian Opening Ceremonies

sober life should be part of the communities' collective knowledge. When the participants were assured that all the data for the evaluation project would be destroyed in five years, many objected. They did not understand why their story would not be shared and become part of the accumulated knowledge of the community. It took a negotiation of formal university regulations to allow participants to choose whether or not they wanted to attach their names to their stories.⁴¹

Occasionally, use of a printed form is problematic. It can be viewed as too official, putting distance between those interviewed and evaluation team members that work closely with the community. In this type of situation, using an oral consent process may be preferable. Regardless of the process, it is important to inform those from whom information is gathered of the reasons for the evaluation and why their information is being sought.

For evaluation plans that are subject to a tribal or community review board or committee, the process used to gain informed consent will need to be approved by those bodies.

We strongly encourage that when a quote or story is used in any public report, time must be taken to double check with those interviewed, to ensure that they approve of the way in which their words are being interpreted.

Provide Incentives and Give Gifts

When we ask for information, we receive an important gift from our community members and program participants. We should practice the value of reciprocity. Offering an incentive, such as a gift

⁴¹ Mohatt, G. & Thomas L. R., "I wonder, why would you do it that way: Ethical dilemmas in doing participatory research with Alaskan Native communities," in *The Handbook of Ethical Research with Ethnocultural Populations and Communities*, J. Trimble & C. Fisher, eds., Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2006, p. 93-115.

certificate to a popular store or cash, should be considered when asking people to take time to participate in a focus group or interview. A small gift, such as a bookmark or a key chain or token from the culture, will always be appreciated. It is a way of giving back for time respondents have contributed to the data collection efforts. Of course, one of the most significant gifts to a community is an evaluation conducted in a culturally responsive manner that provides rich information and stories from which the community can learn and move forward.

Be Prepared for the Unexpected

Conducting interviews and surveys can be exciting and challenging, given the realities of reservation life. It is important to brief interviewers on strategies for handling difficult situations. In some evaluations, trained interviewers from the community have met with threats when approaching a household, even finding themselves at gunpoint.

Occasionally, evaluators will have to deal with factions within a community. It is important to take this into consideration when assigning blocks of households. To mitigate this, conduct interviews through extended or large family groups.

FRAMEWORK

Responsive Information Gathering

