

## THE EVALUATION CORNER

By Dr. Ormond Hammond

**W**e hear so much about accountability in education these days! And almost all educational programs are expected to have an evaluation to show whether they are achieving positive results. The idea of being evaluated can be scary and cause anxiety, especially since evaluators may use unusual jargon or unfamiliar terms. In this article, we are going to talk in everyday terms about evaluation. We, the Planning and Evaluation staff at PREL, hope you will come to feel more familiar and more comfortable with some of the concepts—that you may even, in fact, come to see how evaluation can help you, your school, and your state’s educational system.

### Just what IS this thing called evaluation, anyway?

Consider this interchange:

“How did you like that restaurant we went to?”

“I thought it was good. The fish was very fresh, caught today. The servings were huge! And the menu was great—over 20 selections. How about you? What did you think?”

“Well, it didn’t impress me much. The waiter took over 10 minutes just to bring us water. And they were all out of the blueberry pie!”

“Hmm, I gave it high marks and you flunked it. I guess we need to go back again to get some more data!”

We have just witnessed an evaluation taking place. It happens all the time. Which fruit to buy? Which shirt to wear? What TV program to watch? We are all evaluators. You are an evaluator. Evaluation is so much a part of everyday life that we often don’t even notice when we are doing it. It is a necessary part of our lives and a skill that we need to survive, as well as to better our lives. If that fish in the restaurant had not been cooked properly and we incorrectly evaluated it as fresh, that would definitely be a threat to our health.

### Evaluation is simply judging the value of something.

Program evaluation is simply making this same kind of judgment about a program. Is it being carried out correctly (did the water arrive on time)? Is it having the kinds of effects it set out to accomplish (were the servings adequate)? What were the activities (the menu)? What were the outcomes (how did the meal taste)?

How do we make these kinds of judgments? We gather evidence.

Some things are easier to gather evidence about than others. How long the waiter took to bring us water can be measured with a wrist watch. And either they had blueberry pie or they did not. Yes or no. When it is something like this that can be measured by anyone and the answer would be the same, we call it “objective” evidence.

Some things are more difficult to measure. How fresh was the fish? How do we know? By the color? By the texture? Maybe by the waiter telling us it was caught today! When the available evidence is that of our senses we call it “subjective.”

When we are evaluating educational programs, usually the more objective the evidence, the better. Evaluating a textbook or a new teaching technique, for example, can involve some pretty heavy consequences. We don’t want our kids “eating a poisonous fish,” and we do want their educational meal to be adequate and nutritious!

Evaluation is becoming a common phenomenon in education, as well as in many other fields. It is worthwhile feeling comfortable with what it is and how it works. In future articles, we will explore other aspects of evaluation—How does program planning fit in? What are some good ways to make sure we get objective evidence? What is the difference between short-term and long-term outcomes?—just to mention a few. And we welcome your thoughts and suggestions for future topics.

Join us!

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