Evaluation in nonformal education programs and settings must be framed within its special context—one that demands elasticity, transformation, and collaboration on the part of evaluators.

The Nuances of Being “Non”: Evaluating Nonformal Education Programs and Settings

Emma Norland

The importance of using evaluation has been heartily argued and widely accepted as all but routine in the traditional, formal education domain. There is less evidence, however, of that recognition and acceptance in nonformal education programs and settings. Understanding the significance and consequence of conducting evaluation as a regular part of program development and implementation is less clear the more the educational program deviates from a traditional structure, context, provider, or setting. Even when evaluation is embraced by nonformal education program staff, there tends to be little organizational capacity for conducting evaluation and, many times, only low to mediocre encouragement and support from organizational leadership.

Obviously the extent to which nonformal education programs incorporate evaluation practices and use results varies greatly and tends to be situational rather than systemic. This is both good news and bad news for evaluation advocates. The good news is that, given funding, evaluation can be introduced easily and quickly by hiring a program staff member with evaluation interest or expertise. The bad news is that when that staff member leaves the program or organization, the impetus to continue with evaluation may be lost just as quickly.

This New Directions volume examines the nuances of conducting evaluation in nonformal education programs and settings. We examine a set of
universal evaluation issues—evaluator role, stakeholder involvement, program theory, capacity building, strategy selection, and evaluation use—as they occur and interact within nonformal education situations. The examples we have used do not include all the possible purposes, organizations, content, settings, and audiences found across the nonformal education spectrum, but they do share common characteristics. Illustrations come from conservation education; extension education; and education by zoos, aquariums, museums, parks, and community organizations. Our hope is that by presenting snippets from the nonformal education program evaluation world, readers will gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which common evaluation issues manifest themselves in some less common situations.

Defining Nonformal Education: The Troubling Case of a “Non”

Defining certain words, especially words beginning with the prefix non, is best left to dictionaries. Many words beginning with non present a somewhat unflattering, even disagreeable picture: noncommunicative, nonproductive, nonresponsive. Non suggests the absence of the named characteristic and therefore the opposite of it. Someone who is called nonproductive is not productive—possessing no productivity. Even when the original word is perceived as negative, such as judgmental or trivial, and being nonjudgmental or nontrivial would most likely be seen as positive, the original word still serves as the basis for defining the new characteristic and thus the absence of or opposite of that characteristic. So we really do not know exactly what the new characteristic is; we only know what it is not.

So it is with the word nonformal when used to describe education. Nonformal education resembles something other than traditional, formal education, but what? Nonformal education is not formal education, but what is it? Is it the opposite? Is it the absence of formal? As a visual learner, I much prefer drawings and photos over words. And if words must prevail, stories are useful as illustrations and clarifiers. It is with this in mind that we have sprinkled stories from the field throughout this New Directions volume to portray more clearly the nature of nonformal education and the experience of evaluating it. However, to set the stage, I have provided a few definitions to consider and some characteristics that many nonformal education programs share.

Before delving into a fuller discussion of nonformal, many readers may question the absence of the term informal education. While some scholars prefer a distinction between informal and nonformal, we have chosen to use nonformal for simplicity to represent all education occurring outside formal classrooms. Even as different definitions were initially created for informal and nonformal (for an example of a historical perspective, see Rogers, 2004), the distinctions were and still are mostly administrative.
Defining Characteristics of Nonformal Education

Perhaps the best way to understand nonformal education and its defining characteristics is to examine the similarities among several distinctly different examples.

Examples. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting (2002) portrays its concept of nonformal education as that which occurs outside the classroom (after-school programs, community-based organizations, museums, libraries, at home, and so on) and lists these key attributes to distinguish nonformal education: attendance and leadership is inconsistent; learning opportunities are discreet and time-bound; “teachers” vary in abilities, backgrounds, and command of teaching techniques, content expertise, and group management; and multiple sets of standards or lack of any standards allow curriculum flexibility.

Adult basic and literacy education organizations characterize nonformal education as bottom-up education because participation in these types of programs is usually voluntary and necessitates learner involvement at most stages of program conceptualization and implementation. The following elements define a bottom-up adult education program: having a short-term and specific purpose; being noncredential based; being short, recurrent, or part-time occurrences; offering individualized and practical content; using environment-based, community-related, flexible, learner-centered, and resource-saving delivery modes; and controlled by a democratic, learner-dominated process (Fordham, 1993).

A third example is from the out-of-school youth education programs such as 4-H and scouting that are targeted at youth but spend a great deal of resources on nonformal education for adult volunteers working with their education programs. For example, in his 4H youth development Toolkit for Volunteer Leaders (2003), Etling offers the characteristics in Table 1.1 contrasting formal and nonformal education programs.

Finally, programs for all ages linked to parks, zoos, and other conservation and environmental organizations provide a fourth distinct example. In their review of the environmental education literature, Marcinkowski and Washburn (personal interview, 2005) suggest five characteristics that help define nonformal environmental education programs:

1. Purposes of nonformal programs are often neither uniformly nor solely educational. Nonformal institutions may embed educational purposes and experiences within a variety of programs that are social and recreational in nature, such as in programs for family groups (Tilden, 1957; Sharpe,
2. Target audiences in nonformal settings include school classes, other groups, and walk-in visitors. First-time classes, groups, and visitors are rarely well known. Furthermore, it can be difficult to describe or characterize visiting groups and walk-in visitors in ways that will guide program development. However, visitor characteristics can be discerned and addressed as part of program delivery, as is commonly done in guided forms of interpretation (Tilden, 1957; Sharpe, 1976; Ham, 1992).

3. Program development in nonformal settings becomes, often by necessity, a decentralized process. The task of program design and development or selection and adaptation often falls to that institution’s education staff (Childress, 1976; Disinger, 1981).

4. One of the major concerns of nonformal program and evaluation personnel has been with participant and visitor satisfaction (for example, with the program, instructors, facilities, and support services). This is particularly true for nonformal programs that are dependent on repeat participation or visitation for program revenue or program justification (Chenery and Hammerman, 1984–1985).

5. Participant exposure to programs in nonformal settings varies widely, ranging from a visit of an hour or two, to a full day, to several days. Furthermore, when there is an opportunity for extended program exposure (for example, classes or groups for youth), this is more likely to occur on an intermittent basis (for example, after-school and weekend clubs) than on a continuous basis (as in schools).

### Table 1.1. Characteristics of Formal and Nonformal Education Programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension of Education</th>
<th>Formal</th>
<th>Nonformal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>Emphasis on teaching</td>
<td>Emphasis on learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>Sequential prescribed curriculum</td>
<td>Options, variety, flexibility; often determined by learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Teacher–student; often hierarchical</td>
<td>Facilitator–learner informal relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>Often originate at the state and federal levels. High costs typically associated with formal education</td>
<td>Often local. Low costs are typically associated with nonformal education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time orientation</td>
<td>Future</td>
<td>Immediate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>High structure typically required</td>
<td>Low structure often desirable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Etling (1994), Kahn (1989), and Meredith, Fortner, and Mullins (1997). Thanks to Julie Nielsen for her compilation of this description.
Themes Across the Examples. Three themes are present across these examples of nonformal education programs: elasticity, transformation, and collaborative adventure.

Elasticity. Nonformal education programs and processes anticipate and welcome diversity and the invariable changes that occur in all elements of the teaching-learning exchange. They make room for originality and accommodate differences by using adaptation, tolerance, and flexibility. An obvious implication of this elasticity of nonformal education is that common practices do not necessarily apply. For example, in the world of formal education, a percentage of the budget is sometimes set aside for a program’s evaluation. This is generally not the case in nonformal education, as I learned years ago. When I shared the percentage rule with the head of a struggling nonprofit organization looking for evaluation support for his educational programs, he quickly explained that “a percent of nothin’ is still nothing.”

The reality for many nonformal education organizations is that they are implementing low-budget programs and lower-budget evaluations. A recent experience highlights one way in which evaluators can assist nonformal educators in stretching the boundaries of budgets by using some unusual cost-saving strategies:

I stayed at the home of a member of the science center’s board of directors for a week to conduct a scoping visit. This arrangement was reached through the pleading of the science center’s director of education, the gracious hospitality of the board member, and my knowledge that if I did not agree to cost-cutting measures such as sleeping in a strange home, the possibility of any evaluation work at the science center would be nil.

Evaluation on a nonformal shoestring may require evaluators to analyze focus group data without transcriptions, rely on program staff to enter survey data, or use youth participants to collect systematic observation data on the museum floor.

Transformation. All individuals involved in nonformal education, including learners, teachers, administrators, and stakeholders, can experience benefits from participation. Learners become reflective practitioners. Teachers become eager learners. Relationships are nurtured through expansive, all-party involvement as each becomes an equal yet unique participant in the process. Relationship building and the process of shared learning are major elements in the program’s content; thus, outcomes extend beyond program-specific knowledge and skills to distinctive person-centered life skills and behaviors.

This theme has major implications for evaluators who find themselves in the middle of nonformal education. When an individual enters the nonformal education experience, that person becomes part of that experience and, regardless of the role he or she had on entering, becomes an equal partner in
teaching and learning. This is true for evaluators working in nonformal education who, on entry, may quickly lose their particular identities and related responsibilities. This may sound like a deficit situation, but more often the evaluator gains new, multiple identities, and the associated responsibilities tend to be infinitely greater in number and complexity than originally anticipated.

In fact, in nonformal education program evaluation, the evaluator’s role almost always expands to include tasks and responsibilities well beyond traditional boundaries. It is not unusual for most evaluators to facilitate program theory discussions and even to help program staff articulate and record their program’s theory. But for evaluators working with nonformal education programs, it is not unusual to help the program staff conceptualize their program as a program, help them identify what elements might appear to be part of any nonformal education program’s theory, and then assist with the formulation of their own program’s theory.

**Collaborative Adventure.** Nonformal education programs are developed and offered by organizations other than traditional education institutions. Many times, this organization is a newly created collaboration of multiple organizations from the public, nonprofit, or private sectors. Even when a school district or other formal education provider is one of the partners, representatives from the other organizations may be influencing decisions about the program.

The fact that the formal education organization may have little to no influence on program planning, resources, staffing, and evaluation raises some issues. Because the formal education provider has only a limited presence, his or her knowledge of educational principles and practices may well get left in the dust. Instead, the program decision makers are often members of advisory boards and boards of directors who typically have backgrounds related to finance, staffing, program efficiency, and marketing. Because they are far from the education program’s front line, not only physically but philosophically, they may be less prepared to make educationally sound decisions regarding programming, focusing more on the bottom line than the front line.

Many organizations that join in partnership to implement nonformal educational programs find themselves there because of an internal or external mandate to broaden their mission to include education or to diversify their services by “doing education.” Public agencies are particularly vulnerable to this type of mission creep, and by adding “education” to their services or partnering with others to do so, they believe they are better able to be seen as relevant to clients and funders. Problems arise, though, when these new education services are added but resources are not. Resources used for education are typically redirected away from the major mission areas of the organization, producing perceptions that “education is hijacking ‘our’ people, budget, and facilities.”
Images for Nonformal Education

Images paint pictures of well-known ideas, which can clarify the unfamiliar. Two images come to mind that relate to evaluating programs in nonformal education settings: the authors’ retreat held to create this volume and the series of undeniably ridiculous events that occurred after the retreat, hindering the progress of the volume.

The Authors’ Retreat: Three days in June in the Great Smoky Mountains: Tom, Martha, Julia, David, Nina, Lyn, Cindy, Kate W., Kate C., Nora, Elizabeth, Emma, and John. John was the facilitator. Day One: Hot tub swirling all alone, the fire crackling and spitting, across the valley a lone hawk drifts in the hazy sunlight, Appalachian rockers squeak as quiet conversation competes with the lightly swishing of the leaves overhead. Day Two: Voices raised, brains hurting, darn bees trying for my lemonade, way too many flip chart lists, pretty hot for June—whew, a chorus of pop-tops, hot tub straining with bodies and working overtime, air-hockey anyone? Day Three: Revise the plan and stretch the timeline, what’s with a guitar player in the dining hall—I’m just looking for coffee, the ticking of the clock overwhelms . . . wish we had more time, cups of coffee outnumber the authors—I hate powdered creamer, is someone taking notes? Hugging, waving good-bye, we all promise to stick to deadlines—this volume will be in draft by December 2004.

After the Retreat: Three authors move—two move across the country; one moves twice; two weather the Florida hurricanes; the lucky ones take vacations; some have family births; some have family deaths; one has her home broken into; children get sick; friends have illnesses; friends pass away; some change jobs; two disappear; one reappears; the other one reappears; they all miss deadlines; editors gently prod again, and again, and again and offer incredible assistance and support. This volume is finished in September 2005.

As life events have recently reminded many of us, our best-laid plans sometimes become unrealistic or impossible to complete, a fate shared by many nonformal education programs. Certainly one small, edited volume cannot answer all the questions related to the evaluation issues of this giant group of stakeholders, constituents, organizational types, programs, and evaluators. But it is a start.

References


NEW DIRECTIONS FOR EVALUATION • DOI 10.1002/ev
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