

# Some Old and New Wives' Tales Concerning Curriculum Evaluation<sup>1</sup>

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IF ONE were to judge alone the number of recent publications, whether books, articles, or monographs, dealing with curriculum and curriculum evaluation, one could conclude with confidence that a revolution is under way. Observers of the educational scene also note teachers focusing intense efforts on affective and humanistic curricula and other instructional innovations. Administrators and the public are voicing concern about educational accountability. Public and private groups are turning to the evaluator for assistance in judging the worth of their efforts.

The arsenal of the evaluator is somewhat outdated and depleted when faced with these new demands. Both the theory and practice of evaluation as applied in assessing new curricula need to be revitalized, revised, refurbished, and realigned with today's information and decision-making requirements.

An attempt will be made here to summarize briefly some of the challenges facing curriculum evaluation and evaluators. Further, suggestions will be made for policy decisions and directions that research and applications might take.

<sup>1</sup> The ideas expressed in this paper have been significantly influenced by the writings of Dr. Malcolm Provus, University of Virginia.

Everything considered, the future of curriculum evaluation looks bright. It has progressed rapidly in the relatively short period since its rebirth around mid-century and the new impetus provided by Ralph Tyler. Yet there is a long way to go. Many methodologies have been developed. Educators, as well as the public, have become aware of the value that evaluation data may have in developing and assessing the effectiveness of large-scale educational programs. The "mod world" of curriculum evaluation looks different than its older version. Provus,<sup>2</sup> for example, notes five "Old Wives' Tales" that can be put to rest.

## Old Wives' Tales

The following tales need to be updated and revised:

Old-1. *Evaluation Interferes with Curriculum Development.*

<sup>2</sup> Malcolm Provus. "Evaluation of Ongoing Programs in the Public School System." In: Ralph W. Tyler, editor. *Educational Evaluation: New Roles, New Means*. 68th Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969. pp. 242-83.

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Old-2. *Experimental Designs Are Required for Effective Evaluation.*

Old-3. *The Interests and Desires of Evaluators Are at Odds with Those of the Program Staff.*

Old-4. *Evaluators Must Help Specify Program Objectives.*

Old-5. *Evaluation Is Only a Long-Term Proposition.*

Whether because of a long overdue, poorly written, highly complex, generally irrelevant, unnecessarily long, statistical, and verbose project report, or for any number of other reasons, evaluation's eye has become blacker each year. The tremendous evaluation demands arising from government legislation alone have apparently proved too much of a challenge. The resulting malaise requires immediate attention and medication. For many reasons, primarily those based on experience, it can be argued quite effectively that a generation of "New Wives' Tales" has emerged.

## **New Wives' Tales**

New-1. *Evaluation and Curriculum Development Are Intimately and Positively Related.*

The development of a "formative" evaluation philosophy and methodology has contributed significantly to the acceptance of the role of evaluation in curriculum development and implementation. The key element in the process is the continuous feedback of data to be used to improve the instructional materials or learning sequences as they are being developed. Evaluation information is most helpful when it can be used to do the most good in making for greater effectiveness—not after the fact. Just as evaluation viewed in the formative way can improve product development, so can it be used to provide better individualized learning programs for students.

Periodic assessment aimed at examining progress and the resulting modification of learning experiences can maximize education. Flanagan, for example, describes how the application of formative procedures re-

sulted in the reduction of training time in an in-service program from 45 to 20 to 9 working days.<sup>3</sup> In another example, a Red Cross first aid course was developed which resulted in an 81 percent average criterion performance score. In addition Cronbach<sup>4</sup> has argued for many years that the most significant use of educational measurement and evaluation data is in the *improvement* of curricula. Unfortunately, in the past, evaluation has been viewed as a kind of stopgap measure in the plan to enhance program effectiveness. Today it is accepted as a full-fledged partner.

New-2. *Curriculum Evaluation Designs May Take a Variety of Forms.*

The design of an effective evaluation plan should first be dictated by the needs of the program, the nature of the staff and program, the outcomes expected, and the decisions to be made. One of the chief characteristics of an experimental design is the control and manipulation of variables. In an evaluation, this is usually not possible. Therefore, the design is not appropriate, since such experimental design requirements as randomization cannot be met. It is more likely that descriptive and judgmental kinds of designs will be employed. Even if value judgments are not made, the data provided by a descriptive study can be quite useful in documenting the operation of the project.

Experimental designs tend to be viewed and applied as relatively static and inflexible frameworks. An ongoing real-life curriculum development project is anything but static. A much more flexible approach to design is therefore needed.

Evaluation is basically not a research activity. As opposed to traditional research,

<sup>3</sup> John C. Flanagan. "The Uses of Educational Evaluation in the Development of Programs, Courses, Instructional Materials and Equipment, Instructional and Learning Procedures, and Administrative Arrangements." In: Ralph W. Tyler, editor. *Educational Evaluation: New Roles, New Means*. 68th Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969. pp. 221-41.

<sup>4</sup> Lee J. Cronbach. "Course Improvement Through Evaluation." *Teachers College Record* 64: 672-83; 1963.

evaluation does not concern itself with hypothesis testing, generalizing results, replication, or control of all relevant variables. It is heavily influenced by the constraints of the situation, feasibility, and demands of constituents. In curriculum studies, very often groups can serve as their own controls. We are seeing a movement from relative judgment in assessing performance to something akin to absolute evaluation. Witness the application of criterion-referenced measures in mastery learning as being illustrative.

In the final analysis it may be that the form the evaluation takes is particularly significant. Projects will always show positive results within certain limits. The mere participation in a curriculum development project tends to rejuvenate and inject revitalized interest, motivation, and enthusiasm. Description of what happened may be the greatest contribution that can be made by evaluation.

*New-3. The Aims and Interests of Curriculum Developers and Evaluators Are in Harmony.*

Both groups are interested in improving the teaching-learning process and product. Each can serve as a catalyst for the other. If there is lack of understanding of the roles

of each, fear and eventually resistance will not be far behind. An atmosphere of distrust will inhibit the gathering of the most relevant data. If the evaluator is viewed in an exclusively judgmental role, many problems of acceptance may be encountered. The evaluator is, in a sense, an auditor, but he is also a consultant.

*New-4. Program Objectives Should Be as Representative as Possible.*

The task of an evaluator may or may not include the specification of program objectives. The evaluator's role with regard to objectives will depend upon the needs of the program. If the context is one of a large curriculum development project and he is an internal evaluator, he would probably be involved in specifying program goals and change objectives from the outset. If the evaluator is external to the project, he may only be required to help assess whether or not the objectives have been met. In fact it might be desirable for the evaluator not to be considered "one of the group" and be caught in the middle of the ongoing program with all its red tape, politics, etc.

The "behavioral objectives revolution" has reached such a level of influence in education that it is probably not necessary

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for evaluators to spend time specifying objectives.

Objectives should be contributed by all those concerned with the teaching-learning process at whatever level. Interested individuals such as curriculum planners, administrators, teachers, subject matter experts, educational psychologists, philosophers, and representatives of society in general should be involved. The procedures used in generating the objectives for the National Assessment of Educational Progress are exemplary in this regard. In this "age of accountability," it is essential for educators to maintain ties with their constituents.

#### *New-5. Purpose Should Dictate Length and Time of Evaluation.*

There is no doubt that longitudinal data can be extremely valuable by providing a rational basis for revision and modification of curricula. Yet it can also be argued that short-term evaluations of narrowly defined areas can also provide useful data if made immediately available. An evaluation system should make provision for continuous data collection. The data may be long- or short-term, depending upon the purpose in gathering it. In a similar vein, data need to be gathered at the most practicable time. No data should be gathered merely for their own sake.

If the foregoing represent some changes in the role of the evaluator and evaluation, and to some extent reflect on some problem areas, what are the needs and the directions that evaluation might take in the future?

### **Needed Developments in Evaluation**

Several developments are needed in the general area of evaluation methodology. There is a need for noninterventionist evaluation designs. Ways need to be found whereby the effects of a new program can be assessed without the assessment influencing the outcomes. Webb *et al.* (1966)<sup>5</sup> have used the terms "unobtrusive measures" and "non-

reactive research" to describe this methodology. As perhaps never before, data collection and evaluation design are truly intimately related to each other. Another dimension of the needs in the design area of methodology relates to the flexibility of the design. Projects, because of modification of objectives, revision of treatment being applied, or changes in personnel, must continually reassess what are to be considered relevant evaluation criteria. There is a real danger of mis-evaluation—both under- and over-evaluation—of the program. In the methodological area many new data collection procedures are needed. Observational devices, measures of affective outcomes, creativity tests, ways of assessing the non-reader, systems for the efficient production of criterion-referenced measures, and diagnostic techniques are illustrative of data collection methods that need to be developed. One final area in need of development relates to the methods available to analyze change or gain scores which so frequently form the basis for evaluating program effectiveness.

### **Training of Evaluators**

Education really lacks trained evaluators, at least the kinds of evaluators needed to cope with the new collection-analysis-decision making activities of the schools. Personnel trained only in the classical methodologies of statistics, research design, and testing are less able to cope with new process and product objectives. It may be that the new generation of evaluator must be even more of a "generalist" than were his predecessors. In addition to the usual quantitative tasks, he must be a little bit of a sociologist, economist, social psychologist, anthropologist, and philosopher. He must be possessed of a strong self-concept, high tolerance for ambiguity, and the patience of a United Nations arbitrator.

An imperfect evaluation strategy is emerging which, although far from consummate, is superior, both from practical and methodological standpoints, to the impressionistic procedures which guide most social action programs today. □

<sup>5</sup> Eugene Webb *et al.* *Unobtrusive Measures: Non-Reactive Research in the Social Sciences*. Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1966.

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