

Toward A Collective Approach to Course Evaluation in Curriculum Development, A contemporary Perspective

Charles Nyabero

School of Education, Department of Curriculum and Instructional Media, University of Eldoret P.o Box 1125
Eldoret, Kenya

Abstract

The purpose of this article was to explore on how course evaluation, decision making process, the methodology of evaluation and various roles of evaluation interact in the process of curriculum development. In the process of this exploration, the characteristics the types of evaluation, purposes of course evaluation, methodology of evaluation, designing of course evaluation instruments and common uses for course evaluation data were highlighted. Finally a critique for course evaluation was done where various researches done on the same were discussed.

Keywords: Course Evaluation, Curriculum Development

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Course evaluation is an important part of any given curriculum. This paper will first, define evaluation in its broad form, second it will highlight the characteristics of course evaluation, third the paper will explain the different types and purposes of course evaluation. Fourth, it will discuss one model of evaluation, common uses of course evaluation data, fifth, the paper will look at the designing of course evaluation instruments and appreciate various criticisms of course evaluation.

1.2 COURSE EVALUATION

Evaluation is the determination of the worth of a thing. It includes obtaining information for use in judging the worth of a program, product, procedure or objective, or the potential utility of alternative approaches designed to attain specified objectives. Evaluation, from Tyler's work on the eight year study of the 1930s was defined as the process of comparing performance data with clearly specified objectives. (Levine, 20002), see evaluation as a process of identifying and collecting information to assist decision makers in choosing among available decision alternatives.

Several contemporary evaluation theorists have proposed varying types of evaluation although there are discernable and perhaps important differences among these more molecular types of evaluation, there is a common ingredient in each; in every case specified evaluation activity produces knowledge, however, general or specific not previously available. Evaluation has sometimes been considered merely a form of applied research which focuses only on one curriculum, one programme or one course or lesson. It can contribute to the construction of a curriculum and to the improvement of an existing course. These can be seen as roles of evaluation. The goal of evaluation must be to answer questions of selection, adoption, support and worth of educational materials and activities (Ornstein and Hunkins, 2004).

1.3 TYPES OF COURSE EVALUATION

The literature on curriculum evaluation indicates that there are three major types of curriculum evaluation: diagnostic, formative and summative.

1.3.1. Diagnostic Evaluation

Diagnostic evaluation is done before teaching/learning begins so as to diagnose specific areas of weakness or strength of a learner and to determine their nature, before a programme is designed and implemented. Data from diagnostic evaluation are used to categorize (but not to label) the learner for the purposes of appropriate instruction (Marsh and Willis, 2007; Teachers Proficiency Course, 2007), or to identify the context in which a curriculum will operate so as to justify the implementation of curriculum innovations (Shiundu & Omulando, 1992). Examples of diagnose, evaluation include entry-level tests, situational analysis, and in the classroom situation a review of pre-requisite knowledge.

1.3.2. Formative Evaluation

Formative evaluation is carried out during the teaching/learning process to get data which will be used to strengthen or improve the process. Formative evaluation examines the delivery of the programme, the quality of its implementation, and: the assessment of the organizational context, personnel, procedures, and inputs among other things. At instructional level, formative evaluation includes: weekly tests, observation checklists and termly tests. Instructional evaluation is often regarded formative component of programme evaluation (Shiundu & Omulando, 1992; M & Willis, 2007).

Formative evaluation typically occurs when changes can take place during the current semester, although

many institutions consider written comments on how to improve formative as well. Typically this form of evaluation is performed by peer consultation. Other experienced teachers will review one of their peer's instructions. The purpose of this evaluation is for the teacher to receive constructive criticism on teaching. Generally, peer teachers will sit in on a few lessons given by the teacher and take notes on their methods. Later on the team of peer teachers will meet with the said teacher and provide useful, non-threatening feedback on their lessons. The peer team will offer suggestions on improvement, which the said teacher can choose to, implement (Marsh & Willis, 2007).

Peer feedback is given to the instructor typically in the form of an open session meeting. The peers first reflect on the qualities that were good in the instruction. Then they move on to areas that need improvement. Next the instructor will make suggestions for improvement and receive feedback on those ideas. Students can also participate in formative evaluation. Student evaluations are formative when their purpose is to help faculty members improve and enhance their teaching skills. The teachers may require their students to complete written evaluation, participate in on-going dialogue or directed discussions during the course of the semester.

1.3.3. Summative Evaluation

Summative evaluation is done at the end of a course or a programme. It is concerned with purposes and outcomes of the teaching-learning process. Traditionally, summative evaluation tests whether the stated objectives of the programme have been achieved in Kenya. The terminal examinations such as Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) and the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) examinations should not be confused for summative evaluation, but that they contribute significantly towards this type of evaluation (Marsh & Willis 2007; Teachers Proficiency Course, 2007). From a broader perspective, summative evaluation includes the evaluation of the teacher's performance in using the curriculum, the infrastructure, the learning/teaching resources, time allocation, administrative support, the cost of the programme, and the impact of the programme. The findings of summative evaluation may lead to course continuity, enhancement, or change (Shiundu & Omulando, 1992).

Summative evaluation occurs at the end of a semester usually a week or two before the last day of class. The evaluation is performed by the current students of the class. Students have the option to reflect on the teachers' instruction without fear of punishment because course evaluations are completely confidential and anonymous. This can be done in one of two ways; either with a paper form or with online technology. Typically, in a paper based format, the paper form is distributed by a student while the teacher is out of the room. It is then sealed in an envelope and the teacher will not see it until after final grades are submitted. The online version can be identical to a paper version or more detailed, using branching question technology to glean more information from the student. Both ways allow the student to be able to provide useful and honest feedback. This feedback is to be used by teachers to improve the quality of their instruction. The information can also be used to evaluate the overall effectiveness of a teacher, particularly for tenure and promotion decisions.

2.0 PURPOSES OF COURSE EVALUATION

The general purpose of course evaluation is to provide useful feedback that will aid in decision making about improving learning. More specifically, the purposes of curriculum evaluation include:

- To find out the extent to which the programme has attained or is attaining the set goals.
- To identify the problems that might hinder the attainment of the set goals.
- To find out the extent to which learners have mastered the basic concepts.
- To provide learners and other stakeholders with feedback about their performance.
- To provide educational administrators with useful information about the gaps discrepancies inherent in the programme, and the needs of the institution.
- To provide an objective basis for determining the promotion of students from one grade to another, as well as the awarding of certificates.
- To make reliable decisions about educational planning.
- To identify the difficulties and problems teachers/learners are experiencing in the teaching-learning process and give help in the form of advice, in-service courses or materials where necessary.
- To ascertain the worth of time, energy and other resources invested in a programme.
- To improve the efficiency of the school system.
- To obtain useful information that can assist in the designing and development of future programmes.
- To determine the impact of a given course curriculum on its learners and other users.
- To predict the general trend in development of the teaching-learning process.
- To provide useful information about a learner's entry behaviour into a programme (Shiundu & Omulando, 1992; KIE, 2006, Teachers Proficiency Course, 2007; Marsh & Willis, 2007).

3.0 THE METHODOLOGY OF EVALUATION

Current conceptions of the evaluation of educational instruments (e.g. new course, inductive methods etc.) are still inadequate both philosophically and practically (Republic of Kenya, 2007). The following are different methodologies of evaluation.

3.1. Goals of Evaluation versus roles of evaluation

The function of evaluation may be thought of in two ways. At the methodological level, we may talk of the goals of evaluation; in a particular sociological or pedagogical context we may further distinguish several possible roles of evaluation. In terms of goals, we may say that evaluation attempts to answer certain types of questions about certain entities. The entities are the various educational instruments (processes, personnel, procedures, courses etc.). The types of question include questions of the form. How well does this instruments perform with respect to such and such criteria? Does it perform better than this other instrument? What merits or drawbacks does this instrument have (i.e. what variables from the group in which we are interested are significantly affected by its application?

Levine, (2002), explains that the roles which evaluation has in a particular educational context may be enormously various, it may form part of a teacher training activity, of the process of course development, of an investigation preliminary to a decision about purchase or rejection of material etc. By stressing the constructive part, evaluation may play non-threatening activities (roles) we slur over the fact that its goals always include the estimation of merit, worth, value etc., which all too clearly contributes in another role to decisions about promotion and rejection of courses.

3.2. Evaluation versus estimation of Goal achievement

We can start by asking: How well does the course achieve its goals? Instead of: How good is the course? But it is obvious that if the goals are not worth achieving then it is uninteresting how well they are achieved.

Proper evaluation must include as an equal partner with the measuring of performance against intended goals, procedures for the evaluation of the goals. That is, if it is to have any reference to such goals at all.

3.3. Intrinsic evaluation versus pay-off evaluation

Two basically different approaches to evaluation of a teaching instrument appear possible. The first approach involves an appraisal of the instrument itself; in the analogue this would involve evaluation of the content goals, grading procedures, teacher attitude etc. This is called secondary or intrinsic evaluation.

The other approach proceeds via an examination of the effects of the teaching instrument on the learner and this alone, and it more usually specifies these rather operationally. What really counts here are the effects of the course on the learners appeal to the features of goals, methods and content being defensible only in so far as evaluations of these really correlate with pay-off evaluations.

4.0 DESIGNING OF COURSE EVALUATION INSTRUMENTS

Evaluation instruments should primarily request quantitative ratings and provide space for additional qualitative comments from students. Atleast one question should ask students for a general rating of the course or the instructors. Questions should seek answers on course content. This should include questions about assignments and the relevance of material covered to other courses or to prospective future vocations.

The process of course evaluation instruments design vary widely in terms of the responsibility for developing them. The approval of the instruments should be by at least two – thirds of the faculty within the unit before implementation. Evaluations must generally adhere to institution – wide policies for the administration, collection and dissemination of evaluation results and are generally approved by the Dean, or Director of the faculty, unit, or centre.

Instruments should seek to answer to questions about teaching behaviours of the instruction. These include questions about instructor enthusiasm for the material about availability to students and about classroom atmosphere and engagement. Generally there fore course evaluation instruments include variables such as communication skills, organizational skills, enthusiasm, flexibility attitude toward the student, teacher-student interaction, encouragement of the student, knowledge of the subject, clarity of presentation, course difficulty fairness of grading and exams, and global student rating.

There are several instruments available for course evaluation exercise; they include questionnaires, observation, video and others. It is observed that for any research or information seeking instruments to be reliable, its reliability has to be tested, and this can be done through piloting, objectivity and validity of the instruments has to be checked also be the instruments is used to collect data.

4.1 COMMON USES FOR COURSE EVALUATION DATA

Arthur (2009), have found that evaluation systems help to counter anecdotal information about teaching

behaviours and effectiveness. There are several common uses for course evaluation data; teaching improvement; personnel decisions and course selection (by students).

Arthur, (2009), assert that evaluation tools provide another means to assess teaching and thus help to shrink the existing gap between the evaluation methods for teaching and research. There are several common uses for course evaluation data: teaching improvement; personnel decisions; course selection (by students); and increasingly, in the compilation of teaching award nominations files.

4.2 Teaching improvement

Since the widespread use of evaluation began, researchers have argued that course evaluation data can effectively be used for the purpose of improving teaching and thereby student learning. However, Marsh (2007) and found that course evaluation data alone rarely bring about changes to teaching behaviours since many faculty are not trained in data analysis and are therefore less likely to have the necessary skills to interpret their ratings. Moreover, many faculties are not given the opportunity (voluntary or mandatory) to discuss their results with departmental chairs or deans and only some take advantage of the services and resources offered by campus teaching and learning support offices. As a result, the majority of faculty simply conduct a cursory review of the collected data and rarely attempt to make specific changes based on student feedback.

Research has demonstrated that when faculties are provided training or assistance and consultations with colleagues or faculty/educational developers, they make changes to their teaching behaviours (Stufflebeam, 2002). To encourage change and positively influence teaching behaviours, Scriven (2002) has recommended more open communication regarding collected data and the interpretation of the results. Beran, Violato and Kline (2007) suggest that evaluations be "supplemented by complementary sources of information regarding instructional effectiveness" and argue that "all user groups, including administrators, faculty, and students should be aware (p. 37) of the need for this supplemental information when using student ratings.

4.3 Personnel decisions

Researchers in the 1980s and 1990s regularly questioned the use of course evaluations for summative decisions. In part, these concerns stem from beliefs that ratings data were not being used effectively or equitably. However, the debate about the effective use of evaluation data for summative (and also formative) purposes also relates to the questions that guide these personnel decisions. In the last decade, attitudes have shifted and most scholars, among them Abrami (2001) and Algozzine et al. (2004), generally accept - and/or attest to - the validity of course evaluation ratings for these personnel decisions, including hiring, tenure and promotion.

Thirty years ago, research indicated that while faculty favoured the use of student evaluations for use in promotion and tenure decisions (Scriven, 2002), university administrators were not regularly relying on them for such purposes. More recently, some studies have suggested that administrators are more likely than individual instructors to make use of course evaluation data (Arthur, 2009) particularly for personnel decisions (Nasser & Fresko, 2002; Schmelkin, Arthur, 2009). Some studies have noted that it is unclear whether administrators are using the collected information appropriately (Arthur, 2009), or if it is being misinterpreted or misused as the only source of data about teaching.

4.4 Course selection by students

At some institutions course evaluation data are made available to students through publications such as "anti-calendars." Anti-calendars typically provide summaries of evaluation data, along with selected comments from students. These documents are designed to be used by students for the purpose of course selection; some evidence suggests that their use for such purposes is limited (Scriven, 2002).

4.5. Teaching awards

Course evaluation data are often a required element for teaching award nomination dossiers both internally (at departmental, divisional, or institutional levels) and externally (e.g. the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Association, 3M National Teaching Fellowship). Here, the expectation is that candidates will demonstrate excellence in teaching within their discipline, for which course evaluations serve as one indicator. Moreover, since such data are regularly collected, candidates can normally demonstrate sustained excellence or provide comparable data to indicate their relative performance within their department, division, or institution.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Evaluation is a critical step in curriculum development although some types of evaluation like summative student evaluations of teaching (SETs) have been widely criticized, especially by teachers, for not being accurate measures of teaching effectiveness. Surveys have shown that a majority of teachers believe that a teacher's raising the level of standards and/or content would result in worse SETs for the teacher, and that students in filling out SETs are biased in favour of certain teachers' personalities, looks, disabilities, gender and ethnicity.

The evidence that some of these critics cite indicates that factors other than effective teaching are more predictive of favourable ratings. Many of those who are critical of SETs have suggested that they should not be used in decisions regarding faculty hires, retentions, promotions, and tenure. Some have suggested that using them for such purposes leads to the dumbing down of educational standards. Others have said that the typical way SETs are now used at most universities are demeaning to instructors and have a corrupting effect on students' attitudes toward their teachers and higher education in general. Another setback is about the data the evaluation instruments produce which may be very difficult to interpret for purposes of self or course improvements. Finally it can be observed that paper based course evaluations can cost concerned institutions thousands of money over the years. However, whichever, the argument, evaluation is a necessary process in any curriculum development.

References

- Kenya Institute of Education (2006). *Strategic Plan 2006-2010*. Nairobi: KIE.
- Levine, T. (2002). "Stability and Change in Curriculum Evaluation" in *Studies in Educational Evaluation*. No. 28, PP. 1-33.
- Marsh, J. C. and Willis, G. (2007). *Curriculum: Alternative Approaches, On-going Issues*. (4th ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Pearson Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Ornstein, A. C. & Hunkins, F. .P. (2004). *Curriculum Foundations, Principles and Issues*. (3rd Ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon/Pearson
- Arthur, L. (2009). *From performativity to professionalism: Lecturer's responses to student feedback*. *Teaching in Higher Education* 14(4), 441-454.
- Republic of Kenya (2007). *Teachers' Proficiency Training Manual*. Nairobi: Government Printer.
- Scriven, M. (1991). *Evaluation Thesaurus*. (4 ed.). Newbury Park: Sage Publications. 136 A Handbook for Curriculum and Instruction
- Scriven, M. (2002). "Key evaluation checklist" <http://www.wmich.edu/evalctr/checklists/kec.htm>. Retrieved on November 4, 2008, 9:42am
- Stufflebeam, D. L. (2002). "CIPP Evaluation Model Checklist" <http://www.wmich.edu/evalctr/checklists/cippchecklist.htm> Retrieved on November 4, 2008, 9:30am.
- Tyler, R. W. (1949). *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.