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Evaluating Language Programs

Evaluation for program renewal

KEY IDEAS

- Evaluation is an ongoing process of building understanding of professional work
- Evaluation reflects the stance of the teacher
- Evaluation is an integral part of the process of curriculum renewal

Evaluation as an ongoing process

Evaluation involves making considered judgments about a program to ensure that what is being done in teaching, learning and assessment is worthwhile, effective and sufficient. The process necessarily reflects our stance as languages teachers. Its fundamental purpose is to improve the program/curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment. It involves teachers critically examining what they do in the light of contemporary developments and thinking. As such, evaluation is an integral part of the process of curriculum renewal and teacher professional development. It is an ongoing process of considering and trying out alternatives, reflecting on the outcomes, and making further refinements as needed. It is at the core of our work as professionals.

Evaluation is a systematic process which involves gathering information and giving feedback on the way the program works so that improvements can be made in an ongoing way. Like assessment, evaluation can be formative and summative. Formative evaluation is the regular ongoing reflection on how the program is going while summative evaluation occurs at the end of a program and provides a perspective on the effectiveness of the program. As educators, we reflect constantly on our daily work, often in an instinctive manner. While this is useful, the process can be more effective when it is systematic, explicit and articulated to others.

Evaluation in context

KEY IDEAS

- Evaluation is shaped by, and designed for, the context in which it is undertaken
- Evaluation is particularly valuable when it is a participatory process that includes all those involved

An evaluation may be carried out internally or externally depending on the purpose and context. The value of an external evaluation resides in the fact that it is conducted by someone who is independent vis-à-vis the program and, as such, can bring an 'outsider' perspective to the task. In recent times there has been a move towards evaluation as a participatory process, one that includes *all* those involved in the particular context: students, parents and members of the school's communities. They are the ones most affected by the findings and, if they are the ones who are to make changes, they need to be involved from the outset in planning, the processes and in articulating the outcomes of evaluation.

Context is central to program evaluation. Lynch (1996) has developed the concept of 'context-adaptive' evaluation as a set of processes in which the context (or culture) of the program – its people, their roles and relationships, the conditions, its artefacts – is taken into account at every turn: in planning the evaluation, in developing processes and criteria, in implementing the plan, in articulating the findings. This is in line with the idea that a program develops in its particular environment and needs to be considered in its own terms.

Purpose and scope of evaluation

KEY IDEAS

- The purpose of evaluation is to support improvement in teaching and learning
- The scope of evaluation may include particular dimensions and/or the program as a whole

The purpose of evaluation is to support long-term improvement in programs with the fundamental goal of improving student learning. Evaluation provides teachers with information about the effectiveness of their teaching in relation to students' progress. It enables teachers to think about what they do, how they do it and why, so that they develop awareness and understanding of the evolving culture of learning that they are creating. Evaluation becomes the basis for ongoing renewal when teachers continuously question and evaluate with a view to making explicit to themselves their goals, processes, attitudes and outcomes. They are then in a position to articulate what they are doing, how, and why, to their students, colleagues, administrators, parents and the wider community to whom they are accountable.

A range of dimensions are open to evaluation, as well as the program as a whole. It is important to begin the process of evaluation with a definition of its focus: identifying which particular area or issue needs to be investigated. After the identification of the focus, it will be necessary to plan the processes, implement the plan of action and gather the necessary information, systematically analyse the information gained, reflect critically upon it and use the information to plan further action.

Some important questions include the following.

- What is the goal of the evaluation?
- For whom is it being carried out?
- What criteria will be used for the evaluation?
- How will the evaluation take place?
- What information will be gathered and how?
- How will the information be analysed?
- How will the information be used?

Evaluation as inquiry

KEY IDEA

- Evaluation involves an ongoing process of inquiry

Given that any program is dynamic and ever-evolving, it is essential that teachers continuously evaluate their current programs. Self-evaluation in dialogue with colleagues or a local adviser (a local system or university colleague) can provide valuable professional learning for the teacher(s) involved, as well as a process for ensuring that the program provides fruitful learning for students. Important questions relate to the extent to which students are engaged and progressing in their learning. Evaluation in this way is closely linked to inquiry-based approaches to teaching and the overall *stance* the teacher develops.

Questions for reflection

- 1 What role does evaluation currently play in your own professional program and curriculum renewal?
- 2 What criteria would you use to evaluate your own curriculum? Where would these criteria come from?
- 3 How might you, and those you work with, take an inquiry stance to your work?