Survival of the Fittest: Lessons for program evaluation

Key Words

program evaluation, systems approach, language program evaluation

Abstract

This presentation will propose an evaluation framework that applies a systems thinking approach to evaluate the 'quality' of a discipline-specific English language development program at an Australian university and also offer strategies for the implementation of such a framework. Evaluation of educational programs is a complex endeavour that requires the consideration of interactions and interdependencies among stakeholders, objectives, contexts and themes (Lynch, 2003; Patton, 2011; Walton, 2014). Despite this complexity, primary stakeholders' expectations of the outcomes of the evaluation are often reduced to simplistic measures of gains in students' competency levels or cognition. More so in the case of language or literacy programs, where such expectations are unrealistic as it is impossible for any individual program to lay sole claim for the improvement in students' language competency due to the many variables that impact on language learning. Yet, it is these expectations that drive stakeholders' resourcing decisions. As ALL practitioners, we are constantly under pressure to demonstrate the quality of our language or literacy programs in terms of meaningless lean statistical representations that do little to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the actual worth of the program. Quality viewed in this sense comes from a positivist, economist, perspective which is devoid of any consideration of contextual or contingent factors (Kiely & Rea-Dickins, 2005) and in fact, such interpretations could potentially impede any form of good practice that is in place. A consideration of contextual and contingent factors necessitates a systems approach which views program evaluation in the light of complex factors that exist within the larger system in which the program is embedded. A systems approach not only allows for a comprehensive evaluation of the program but could also inform program design from a continuous improvement aspect. Our challenge as AALL practitioners is in educating ourselves and the larger community to adopt a broader conceptualisation of what constitutes quality to ensure that our programs are effective, efficient, equal, relevant and sustainable.

References

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