

CAUCE Scholarship & Research Fund: Final Report

Identification of Researcher(s) and Project

Project Title: Evaluation-Focused Continuing Education in the Social Sector

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Background Literature & Purpose of the Research

Across Canada, evaluation is used to measure the effectiveness of practices, programs, and policies (Nielsen et al., 2018). As such, professionals across sectors who develop and implement programs have increasingly been asked to bear a significant burden of data collection to show evidence of success as they seek or renew funding. Particularly within the social sector, community-based organizations face overwhelming pressure to generate evidence demonstrating accountability and impact. However, many have expressed that they often lack the knowledge, capacity, and resources to produce this kind of evidence (Cousins et al., 2014; Liket et al., 2014). To better understand existing evaluation needs within the Alberta context, a series of provincial community engagement consultations and a review of the literature was conducted by the Evaluation Capacity Network (ECN). One major theme identified was that universities have a pivotal role to play in increasing the evaluation capacity of the social sector by creating relevant training opportunities for professional learners (Gokiert et al., 2017).

The purpose of this research project was to address existing evaluation gaps in the social sector through innovative models of community-engaged evaluation teaching and learning. Specifically, our objectives were to: (1) evaluate a pedagogical model centered around blended, experiential co-learning and co-creation; (2) conduct an environmental scan of existing models of evaluation-focused continuing education (CE) across Canada; (3) deepen understandings of community needs in regards to applied evaluation training; and (4) mobilize project findings and expand partnerships within the University of Alberta and other academic institutions to initiate the development of more comprehensive CE programs in evaluation. This project was led by the ECN, housed in the Community-University Partnership, School of Public Health, University of Alberta.

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, and its impact on our project resources (e.g., time, student's availability), we have been able to leverage resources and capacity through the ECN to complement the CAUCE grant and to achieve our objectives. Although we had to be flexible within our original proposal, we were still able to gather relevant, timely, and useful information. This report will summarize the methodology, findings, and impacts of this project.

Methodology

Objective 1 (Evaluating an Innovative Model of Teaching and Learning Evaluation):

With a Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund (TLEF, 2018-2019) grant awarded by the University of Alberta, our team developed and piloted UEval in June 2019. We submitted and received ethics approval to collect data both during and after the course to better understand the effectiveness of the UEval model of blended, experiential co-learning and co-creation. As part of a thesis, Karbajian (2021) completed the evaluation of UEval. A total of 52 learners participated in this one-week evaluation institute, of which 45 learners provided consent to participate in the study (17 CE learners, 22 graduate students, four undergraduate students, and two auditors). Seven course facilitators, who guided learners through case study work, also consented to participate. Qualitative data was gathered from: i) learners' written reflections about their experiences within the course; and ii) facilitator's focus group session discussing facilitator perceptions of their own training and preparedness, learner preparedness, challenges in facilitation and the role of the key informants for case studies. Quantitative data was gathered from learners' pre-post competency surveys, where learners rated their level of competence in the 36 evaluation competencies sorted into 5 domains from the Canadian Evaluation Society (2018). Qualitative data was thematically coded and quantitative data was analyzed with descriptive statistics, a repeated measures multivariate analysis of variance, and a post-hoc repeated measures univariate analysis of variance.

Objectives 2 and 3 (Environmental Scans and Scoping Reviews on Evaluation-Focused CE):

A web query was conducted over six weeks to identify existing evaluation-focused CE programs across Canada, the United States, and other capacity building organizations and institutions. Through an initial scan of websites, we identified that learning opportunities were being offered through for-credit evaluation programs at the graduate and undergraduate levels, as well as post-secondary or community-based CE sessions. Graduate-level evaluation programs were explored using the Consortium of Universities for Evaluation Education (CUEE) 2018 Inventory of Canadian Graduate Evaluation Education. CUEE is connected to all Canadian institutions offering evaluation programs in higher education. Information related to the type of offering (i.e., course, certificate, diploma, degree), number of credits, mode of delivery, and any practical course components were recorded. A broader search of Canadian universities outside those listed in the inventory identified other learning opportunities offered for-credit at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. We also explored non-credit evaluation workshops, courses, or training sessions for professional learners. Information related to type of offering (i.e., workshop,

credit/non-credit course, training certificate), time investment, target professional field/audience, mode of delivery, and any inclusion of practical experience in course content was recorded.

To further our understanding of evaluation-focused training needs in the social sector, we also conducted five scoping reviews. In these reviews, we systematically examined gaps and opportunities in evaluation education, specifically focusing on: culturally-responsive evaluation; community-driven evaluation; evaluation capacity building; evaluation use and influence; and evaluation in the early childhood development field.

Objective 4 (Expanding Evaluation-Focused CE):

UEval was offered again in a virtual format in June 2020 and 2021. Due to COVID-19 and the limitations around face-to-face instruction, we faced the challenge and opportunity to develop and pilot an online version of the institute for these two years. Across these two offerings, a total of 13 CE learners across diverse fields (i.e., government ministries, community-based organizations, and academic institutions) participated alongside 38 graduate students and five undergraduate students. Further, in 2021, 10 graduate students from Queen's University joined UEval by registering in a parallel course housed at their home institution (QEval).

To further build evaluation capacity in continuing and professional education, from October 2019 to July 2020, EvalLab was offered in partnership with the Edmonton Chamber of Voluntary Organizations. Over six sessions, with the last two being delivered online due to COVID-19, non-profit sector professionals came together to collaboratively deepen their understanding of evaluation, reflective practice, and critical learning. Another round of EvalLab will be offered later this fall (2021) using a mix of synchronous and asynchronous virtual delivery. With the increased need for evaluation in the non-profit sector, EvalLab offers an affordable and accessible training opportunity for organizations often lacking the capacity to meet these needs.

Finally, in collaboration with the Alberta Mentoring Partnership (AMP), and funded through a Mitacs Accelerate Initiative, we developed and delivered an online evaluation curriculum for professionals affiliated with mentoring organizations across Canada. This initiative included (1) development and delivery of two online workshops; (2) development and delivery of a 6-month learning opportunity for 10 CE learners from 5 organizations to build their capacity to create and implement evaluation frameworks, and then use evaluation findings; (3) individual coaching for participating organizations between sessions on implementation of their evaluations, data collection, and data use; and (4) support in mobilizing knowledge from projects towards practice, program, and policy change within the organizations. Based on the success of this initiative and partnership, a second grant from the Mitacs Accelerate Initiative was obtained to develop and deliver more evaluation-focused CE offerings for lower-capacity organizations affiliated with AMP.

These evaluation-focused CE initiatives were developed using a collaborative, flexible approach with our community partners and participating CE learners. Across these three initiatives, both quantitative and qualitative data was collected from participants, allowing us to identify key learnings.

Key Findings

Objective 1 (Evaluating an Innovative Model of Teaching and Learning Evaluation):

Learners' self-reported competence in all five domains of evaluation competencies (reflective, technical, situation, managerial, and interpersonal practice) significantly increased from pre- to post-UEval (Karbabian, 2021). Furthermore, in the qualitative data, Karbabian (2021) identified four themes in learner and facilitator responses. In the first theme, participants said that learners in UEval learned with and from other learners in their case study groups. In the second theme, participants identified an increase in learner comprehension and application of evaluation. In the third theme, participants felt that participating in case study groups helped learners' model and practice community-engaged evaluation. Finally, in the fourth theme, participants noted that by building learner competencies and community-engaged evaluator practice, they built their capacity for evaluation. Subthemes for each overarching theme can be found in Karbabian's (2021) work. Further, together with students, staff, and partners, we have published a special issue article around this work (Gokiert et al., 2021).

Objectives 2 and 3 (Environmental Scans and Scoping Reviews on Evaluation-Focused CE):

The online scan of evaluation-focused education was useful in identifying common practices or gaps within the opportunities currently available. Continuing and professional education offers more than 50 non-credit evaluation opportunities, both through academic institutions and community-based organizations. While hands-on learning was commonly observed, with approximately half the programs including practical experience at the learner's workplace or with another organization, few opportunities focused on capacity building or community-driven approaches.

We furthered these findings in our five scoping reviews. Publications related to evaluation capacity building have been trending upwards over the last 20 years, with more than half of the 180 articles identified in one review being published between 2014 and 2019. This promising finding suggests that evaluation capacity building, as an area of scholarship and practice, is broadening. Moreover, as found in our web-based searches, there are increases in experiential evaluation education, which in turn is increasing the practical competence of novice evaluators. Based on our findings, some additional areas that evaluation education and capacity building could focus on include: creating and disseminating principles and exemplars of culturally responsive evaluation; educating evaluators on knowledge about specific cultures within Canada to prepare them for culturally responsive evaluation; identifying and teaching evaluators specific strategies for increasing use of evaluation findings; and training on how technology can be used

to improve evaluation use. Three of these scoping reviews have been submitted for publication at this time.

Objective 4 (Expanding Evaluation-Focused CE):

Based on our analyses of quantitative and qualitative data, we identified four key learnings. First, we recognized the challenges and benefits of online learning during COVID-19. Initially we struggled with decisions to transition our initiatives online as we were unsure about our ability to provide the same quality of experience to learners without face-to-face interactions between learners, educators, and community members. Once we decided to transition online, we had to reconceptualize our initiatives and the methods of course delivery while still providing opportunities for authentic learning and connection among students. For example, pre-recording lectures allowed students flexibility in watching core course material and opened up more time for interaction in Zoom breakout rooms during synchronous sessions. Although these online experiences were different from in-person experiences, we were able to engage learners outside Edmonton and create innovative ways to facilitate collaborative and experiential learning, while giving learners practical experiences in evaluation.

Second, a challenge we have identified and continue to struggle with revolves around making initiatives financially accessible for CE learners and the organizations that may be funding their participation. While we have identified some funding or subsidy opportunities for CE learners and have supported them in submitting applications, we are continuing to explore ways to overcome this barrier.

Third, we have gained a strong appreciation for the importance of partnership in our work. The needs of community and CE learners are so diverse, and by working with our partners and learners, we have been able to create flexible structures in our initiatives that allow us to respond and modify our approach to meet the diverse needs of our learners.

Finally, not dissimilar from our learnings within the previous objectives of this project, we have learned that the most effective learning spaces are those that are collaborative and active. Learners benefit from practicing theories and knowledge in hands-on, practical evaluation work alongside community organizations with evaluation needs. Our CE learners were able to gain the skills and confidence they need to do evaluation in their work while also connecting with other students and community members who may challenge their thinking and provide support, now and in the future.

Key Impacts on CE and Community

Our findings have several impacts on CE and the community. Our evaluation of UEval demonstrated that this pedagogical model (i.e., community-engaged learning, experiential co-learning, and competency-based approaches) is an effective approach to CE in building

evaluation competency, capacity, and confidence. This model can be replicated by those seeking to provide practical evaluation education, and may be considered for CE in other fields and topics. Second, findings from our environmental scans and scoping reviews have helped identify opportunities to enhance community-driven and culturally-relevant evaluation training, as described above. We are continuing to work towards completing the remaining reviews, and mobilizing our findings. Third, we have identified various methods for effectively engaging community partners in evaluation education initiatives for CE learners. These methods and approaches can be replicated to further evaluation education in more areas and potentially further CE in other fields. In particular, being flexible to environmental demands and stressors, being conscious of initiative accessibility (particularly financially), involving partners in the development of meaningful initiatives, and ensuring initiatives are collaborative and active are key to effective CE in the community.

Conclusion

Our research project has met our overarching goal of addressing existing evaluation gaps in the social sector through innovative models of community-engaged evaluation teaching and learning. Through our initiatives, we have demonstrated the effectiveness of using a blended, experiential approach of co-learning and co-creation in evaluation education; identified existing evaluation-focused CE initiatives; identified gaps and opportunities for improving evaluation training in meeting community needs; and used our findings and partnerships to develop and implement evaluation-focused CE opportunities that begin to address these gaps and opportunities. In doing so, we have also learned many lessons about CE in evaluation and hope that these lessons will not only serve to continue bettering evaluation education but also CE more broadly.

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