

WHEN LITERATURE IS LIMITED: USING GRANT LANGUAGE AND PROJECT PARTNER NOTES TO CONCEPTUALLY FRAME A STUDY

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Abstract

Expanding beyond traditional roles, some museums are now striving to serve as public learning and social catalyst institutions for their communities. Museums are increasingly engaging with communities to address social, environmental and other complex contemporary issues, sometimes partnering with other institutions and organizations to engage and serve community members. Because these roles and programs are often untested, assessment is critical for identifying potential outcomes, developing recommendations for program improvement, and justifying their existence in a world that increasingly demands accountability. However, literature relevant to museum programs addressing specific social issues is limited. This paper presents an alternative strategy for developing a conceptual framework for a future program assessment, using grant language and project notes as the foundation.

1.0 Museum Services: Traditional and Emerging Roles

The tradition of museums is rooted in collections of physical objects, images, and documents, with simply labeled objects typically aligned like rows of tin soldiers on shelves behind glass. This approach reflects the primary role of museums until the 1970s: gathering, preserving, and studying the objects and related topics (Chhabra 2008; Gilmore & Rentschler 2002). Public access was limited (Edwards & Graham 2006) and curators typically did not care if the occasional visitor understood or developed any meaningful connections with the objects (Kuhne et al. 1997). The items themselves, and the relevant science conducted around them, were sufficient.

Many such museums still exist. However, pressured externally and internally for indicators of relevance and accountability, many museums gradually became more involved in attracting visitors and providing quality services (Edwards & Graham 2006). This included delivering educational programs for visitors by utilizing artifacts. In recent decades, the museum field has been engaged in significant self-reflection and is in the process of re-engineering itself, broadening its services from being purely custodial to including more socially-oriented services. Museum leaders have identified a need for museums to become more relevant to their home communities, more engaged with community members through partnerships and collaboration, and more involved with the social, environmental, and other critical issues of our current world. Although collections remain important, according to the Code of Ethics for Museums (American Association of Museums [AAM], 2000), museum accreditation now requires that museums: engage in ongoing, reflective institutional planning that includes audience and community involvement; strive to be inclusive and offers opportunities for diverse populations; and assert their public service role, with education at the center.

Given this, accredited museums are required to contribute to social change as part of the informal educational system and to become more responsive to a variety of audiences (Edwards & Graham 2006). New journals are emerging to reflect these changes (e.g., *Museums and Social Issues*) but literature relevant to museum programs addressing specific social issues or target groups is limited. Thus, conceptually framing an assessment of a non-traditional program based on existing literature is challenging. Nevertheless, it is important to assess ongoing programs because findings can contribute to “rendering judgments, facilitating improvements, and generating knowledge” (Patton 1997, p. 65). The purpose of this paper is to present an alternative strategy for conceptually framing an assessment of a collaborative museum program serving non-traditional museum clients.

2.0 Inquiry Process

A set of beliefs can be generated or characterized by understanding several basic questions such as: what can be known about the topic?, or the nature of the knowledge (ontology); how can knowledge about the topic be acquired?, or the nature of the relationship between the knower and the known (epistemology); and how should researchers go about discovering knowledge about the topic? (methodology) (Guba 1990). This paper will focus on epistemological considerations. One way of viewing natural phenomena is by standing outside the process and recording objectively; another way, particularly in social science, is through the interaction of inquirer and phenomenon (Guba & Lincoln 1994). Our inquiry process for this project is based on the

latter.

Because the ultimate assessment is about a relatively new type of program, the research is exploratory, the participants belong to a group that is likely to be distrustful of and intimidated by research, and the participants are likely to have relatively low levels of formal education, we chose an inquiry approach that initially relied on the perceptions of colleagues already engaged in the program. We then became involved as engaged scholars to develop a trusting relationship with clients. Preliminary patterns and associations derived from existing program-associated documents were used to frame the study.

3.0 Study Context

Michigan State University was asked to assess the impacts and efficacy of an ongoing, non-traditional museum program targeting transitional homeless people in the community. However, literature relevant to museum programs addressing specific social issues or target audiences, such as at-risk populations, is limited. No literature, theoretical framework or conceptual model assessing the impacts of a museum-based program to enhance literacy, self-value, and/or independence of homeless citizens was found. The challenge, then, was to create an alternative way to frame the program assessment using other sources.

The program *Your Story and Mine: A Community of Hope* (YSM) was developed by the Michigan Historical Museum (MHM) in collaboration with Advent House Ministries (AHM) in Lansing, Michigan. From 2008-2009 the YSM program was offered to transitionally homeless clientele of AHM. The learning objectives of the project were to meet specific social studies and English language arts curriculum standards. Other broad goals were to help homeless adults develop a deeper sense of self-value and purpose through shared learning with heritage, and to sensitize the broader community to issues related to homelessness.

4.0 Formative Assessment and Qualitative Analysis

This paper describes the process used for developing a framework for the program's assessment since directly relevant literature was limited. Two fundamental methodological decisions were made: 1) formative assessment would be used to frame the final evaluation; and 2) a qualitative approach would be used.

Brinkerhoff (2002) suggests choosing the word 'assessment' rather than 'evaluation' when a study's investigative process is more exploratory and developmental than confirmatory. In this case, both the requested study and the study framing were process-oriented. Therefore, the term assessment is used throughout this paper. In program assessment, the voices of stakeholders – those having a vested interest in the program being assessed – are important (Greene 1994). Stakeholders in this study are program partners, the granting organization, program participants, staff and volunteers, and researchers.

To develop a framework in the context of the non-traditional YSM museum program, formative assessment was the selected methodological approach. In general, assessment can be classified into two types: formative and summative. According to Scriven (1991), formative assessment is used in the early stages of program development to frame initial program concepts and to improve them through various pilot-testing strategies; usually it is most useful to participants and stakeholders within a program. Summative assessment is conducted most often at the end of program implementation, is more likely aimed at making a judgment about a program, often to determine if objectives have been met, and is commonly performed by external evaluators. A summative approach provides an independent program assessment by identifying success indicators that inform recommended changes by detecting problems potentially not obvious to people involved directly with the program.

Because this study was initiated by program stakeholders to assess the program's efficacy and its impacts on participants and staff, and to provide recommendations for program revisions, the framework was designed as a formative rather than summative assessment. Generally, formative assessment is meaningful in the context of an ongoing, newly emerging program because it can be useful immediately to stakeholders to improve the program and identify actions for next steps. Additionally, results of a formative assessment can frame a subsequent summative assessment.

A qualitative approach was used because the program evaluation request was initiated by the client and no theoretical or conceptual framework existed; thus, the first goal was to develop a program assessment framework to identify issues or problems, explore potential program outcomes, and investigate areas for program improvement. Although limited existing data sources were available, those that did exist were rich in ideas expressed by various stakeholders. Thus, qualitative analysis was deemed appropriate for conducting the formative assessment. An additional benefit was that qualitative analysis is suited to discovering the causal nature of program impacts because it focuses on obtaining information about the causes of behaviors from varied stakeholders and from relevant documents, and is based on the history of relevant events (Mohr 1999). Because the program of interest addressed an emerging social issue, qualitative analysis was deemed appropriate.

As in any research, critical issues in qualitative analysis are reliability and validity. In qualitative assessment, reliability is defined as being "independent of the accidental circumstances of the data collection process" and validity is "the degree to which the data have been interpreted in the right way" (Anastas 2004, p. 63). To enhance the quality of a qualitative assessment, triangulation techniques – such as combining multiple data sources, observers, analysis methods, theories, and researchers – are useful (Patton

1999). As different methods reveal different aspects of inquiry, using some, if not all, of these techniques can help produce a more reliable and valid explanation of study results. This study used three data sources – grant language, program reports, and partner notes – from varied stakeholders.

5.0 Conceptualizing the Assessment Framework

As an alternative to reliance on existing theory or conceptual framework, this collaborative project used a four-step process: i) understanding the program context; ii) identifying relevant, valid data sources that would inform specific activities and intended program outcomes to be assessed; iii) analyzing qualitative data to identify patterns, and organizing emerging themes based on intended program outcomes; and iv) conceptualizing a framework by adapting existing theoretical model(s) to organize the patterns and themes found through data analysis.

5.1 Understanding the Program Context

Program assessment is expected to provide relevant information for judging the success of programs, facilitating program improvements, and generating knowledge among program partners and participants (Patton 1997). For delivering these benefits, one critical component of program assessment is gaining understanding of a program's nature and context. Participatory observation was one method used in this study to understand the program, its context, and the people within the program, and to establish relationships and trust with clients and program participants, all of which are critical for both formative and summative assessment. Participatory research is an approach used to develop mutual respect among people in a study context as well as between them and the researchers (Cornwall & Jewkes 1995). Accordingly, we looked for themes and ideas in ongoing dialogues, expecting to find a direction for program assessment by working collaboratively with stakeholders.

During the fall of 2008, the authors participated in three YSM classroom sessions as part of the pre-assessment process. Additionally, we stayed in contact with project partners to discuss the intent and desired deliverables of this assessment project. In this way, we identified initial conceptual themes for program assessment that reflected both potential outcomes of the program and needs of the stakeholders. Participant observation helped confirm/disconfirm as well as supplement other data sources.

5.2 Identifying Data Sources for Framework Development

This study used narrative data sources. One of the strengths of using narrative data is that they can illuminate the real-world context in an open-ended way (Anastas 2004). Because documents and notes can provide expected and unexpected perceptions, as well as both positive and negative outcomes of a program, these data are important in developing an assessment framework. They are valued over results based on quantitative approaches that usually are not designed to address all issues, particularly unexpected outcomes. Another advantage to using narrative data sources is that they capture the importance of "stories" about the program (Dart & Davies 2003). This is insightful and valuable because the dialogues surrounding a program's context are likely to reflect program values with less interference by researchers than is often introduced by quantitative measures.

Data for qualitative assessment came from three sources: the grant proposal, program reports, and partner notes. First, language from the grant proposal that ultimately funded the program was analyzed because it reflects the diversity and complexity of contemporary museum roles and audiences. This is consistent with AAM's Code of Ethics that specifies museums' increasing responsibility to develop the social capital of their respective communities (Chhabra 2008). Grant language, therefore, can reflect ongoing issues and problems, articulate expected outcomes, and describe future directions for museum programs. In turn, museums funded by government and other granting organizations respond to this change, reflecting the emerging roles in specific program contexts.

Second, the notes kept by project partners (Michigan Historical Museum and Advent House Ministries staff and volunteers), and the reports informed by notes, were used. Education staff, program partners, and volunteers for the program expressed their perspectives about core themes of the program, intended program outcomes, and their observations, experiences and insights from working with program clients. To inform and provide context for their written comments, information about the various partners' values also was necessary. They were encouraged to engage in dialogue about concrete outcomes, which was reflected in both the grant language and notes (Mohr 1999). Thus, to better understand emergent themes, we examined stories from the partners and information from the background documents. We believe partner notes revealed expected program outcomes that they valued.

5.3 Analyzing the Data

Content analysis was used to analyze the narrative data. Content analysis is beneficial for determining the psychological and/or emotional states of persons and/or groups (Weber 1990). As such, this method is useful in assessing partners' perceptions and the program context. Content analysis used in this assessment followed the tradition of Carney's (1990) Ladder of Analytical Abstraction. Figure 1 provides a schematic representation of the process.

<Insert Figure 1 about here>

Table 1 lists the codes that emerged from the two data sources, which were then used to categorize the data. The content analysis followed the definitions and rules created for each code. Ideas related to program impacts were then categorized and described from this summarized data.

<Insert Table 1 about here>

5.4 Developing a Framework by Adapting Bennett's Hierarchy of Outcomes

Although data collection and the analysis processes must be open enough for discovering novel themes and findings, prior work should be used in framing and discussing a qualitative study (Anastas 2004). This study adapted Bennett's (1975) Hierarchy of Targeting Outcomes, as this framework allows for monitoring changes in knowledge and attitudes of program participants and stakeholder groups. The emerging themes were clustered at three levels of the hierarchy: knowledge and awareness; attitudinal changes; and group transformation. Figure 2 provides a three-tier framework for hierarchical program impacts.

<Insert Figure 2 about here>

Level one impacts include new knowledge and awareness, brought about through program participants' learning experiences. This learning reflects "breakthroughs," or changes in the participants' cognitive states. Level two impacts are related to changes in attitudes and social interactions occurring as a result of new knowledge and insights gained through the project. This implies, in part, a feeling of belonging, and the freedom to share affection with each other. It is, therefore, expected that these social connections provide the building blocks necessary for effectively re-engaging with the community outside of the program. Level three impacts are related to transformations that occurred within the group, as a result of group dynamics and formation of a community of learners. This may contribute to feelings of self-empowerment and satisfaction, gained through continuing engagement both inside and outside the program.

6.0 Conclusion

This paper describes the process followed in developing a new conceptual framework for a non-traditional museum program, which was necessary because existing literature was limited. The process of developing the framework was built around the views of program stakeholders. Framework development used formative assessment, an effective way of monitoring and improving ongoing programs by sharing understanding among program stakeholders. Biases and weaknesses include limited narratives, the lack of a client voice (which would be assessed during summative evaluation based on the framework derived in the described process), and heavy reliance on the program staff's "lens." However, this process provided a solid framework for the next phase of the program's assessment, and was used later to structure guiding questions for personal interviews with program participants.

To improve the framework, it would be useful to include perspectives from stakeholders outside the program. This assessment dealt specifically with issues that ultimately need to be understood by other community members for overall program improvement to occur, and to sensitize other community members to issues faced by the program's clients, transitional homeless people, if community transformation is to occur. Finally, several staff members pointed out that there seemed to be more potential for attitudinal change and group transformation in the final stage and, for this reason, a follow-up study should be planned in the future. Nevertheless, we believe that this process resulted in a solid framework for assessing the program, and can be modified in the future, as needed, when additional themes emerge.

7.0 Citations

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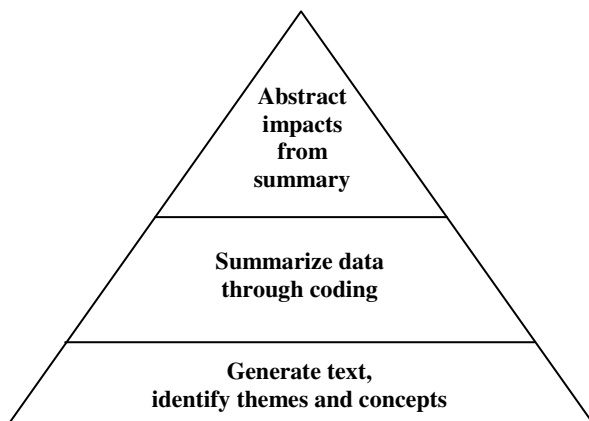


Figure 1. The process of data analysis

Table 1. Codes for content analysis

Code	Definition
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Social connection	Human interaction between program participants and staff, realized through programmatic activities
Historical connection	Program activities that focus on history
Family connection	Program activities that facilitate family contact and relationship restoration
Motivation for program	Strong interest in participating in program activities
Motivation for life	Strong interest to make personal life improvement
Self-esteem	Positive feeling of self-worth
Mentorship	Personal relationship, which results in learning and personal growth
Capacity building	Improvement in ability of organization to meet client needs
Networking	Creation of multiple relationships between individuals
Program growth	Expansion and/or diversification in program offerings

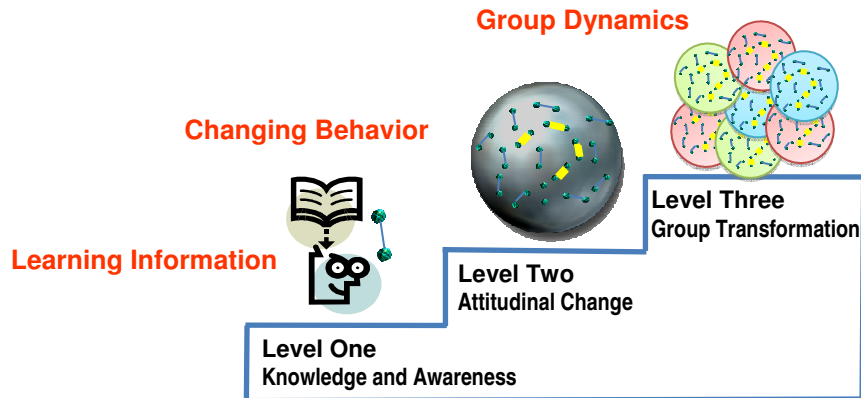


Figure 2. Framework for the program impacts assessment