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COLLEGE LEARNING RESOURCES PROGRAMS

A Formative Evaluation of Formative Evaluation: The State-of-the-Art Concept

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Although Scriven and Markle got us thinking purposively about a type of evaluation that would help us know what was going right and what was going wrong as we moved toward desired educational results, the concept of formative evaluation has been more respected than used.

This section of the *Journal of Instructional Development* deals with the topic of formative evaluation and presents several views on the issues of what formative evaluation is, how formative evaluation might become a more useful tool of our trade, and where we might want to turn our future attentions.

Most authors (cf. this issue) define formative evaluation in terms of determining "en route" performance and making required changes in *instructional materials*. The emphasis has been on instructional design and development. However, it seems to me that the concept is far too useful, and far too important, to limit it to instructional materials or even instructional matters alone.

It is true that the formative evaluation of instructional materials increases the probability that materials will work, but it is also true that the concepts and tools make general sense. There is logic as well as rationality to the concept that if you want to achieve a given result, you should determine along the way whether or not you are in fact moving toward the target, and if you are not, that mid-course corrections should be made to assure the required results. This idea is sound for instructional development, and it is also important for higher-order interventions, such as school systems, corporations, and governments. Any time we want to make a change (tinker with the "natural order") we are intervening. Schools are socially defined interventions; so are courses and training programs—they are intended to change behavior which otherwise would remain as it was before intervening. When we intervene on purpose it is helpful to: (1) know where we are going and why; (2) know how to get there; and (3) make sure that we are moving effectively and efficiently toward valid and useful objectives. What we do (or should do) for instructional design and development is also what we should do for organizations—whole organizations as well as parts of organizations.

We use formative evaluation every

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EDITOR'S NOTE

The consulting editors for this section were: Brenda M. Branyan, J. Steven Soulier, Don Smellie, and Jefferson Eastman, Jr. (Utah State University); Walter Wager, Robert Stakenas and Robert Morgan (Florida State University).

day (perhaps without realizing it)—not to do so would bring us to ruin. Take, as an example, simply driving a car. I know where I am going, have a route in mind, and know when I should arrive, and in what condition I should be when I get there. My driving is a process selected to get from here to there, and while I go I encounter, en route, requirements to change course. Such changes might include steering around a daydreaming pedestrian, detouring around the corner with chuck holes remaining from last winter's ravages, stopping for fuel, or even fixing a tire. If I did not constantly keep in mind where I am going, how well I am progressing, and make required mid-course corrections, I might never get to where I intended to go—I might have a serious accident or run out of gas. Through "formative evaluation", I learn to evaluate my current status and revise my original plan as required. I might even change my goal along the way.

While formative evaluation seems to make sense to most people, it is more honored than used. Perhaps the egos of developers militate against a procedure which requires error to be surfaced formally and publicly and change to result. Perhaps we do not fully comprehend that formative evaluation could be applied outside of instructional development, thinking of it only as a tool for learning design, not a tool for life. Or perhaps we are so used to doing things the same old way, occasionally changing a label or a word, that we never internalize formative evaluation as a way of life—a tool for improvement.

Given the diversity of views and practices surrounding formative evaluation, it is timely to consider the state-of-the-art, both conceptually and operationally, of formative evaluation. It would be only fitting if the inquiry initiated in this issue would lead to refining our understanding of the concept—a formative evaluation of formative evaluation, if you will.