
~ TRAINING SOLUTIONS ~

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PROMOTING LIFELONG LEARNING: ENCOURAGING SELF-EVALUATION

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The truly educated person is the one who has learned how to learn and how to change. ~ Carl Rogers

INTRODUCTION

Promoting lifelong learning as a component of early childhood training requires a multifaceted approach that includes both reflection and self-evaluation. Reflection, the process that engages learners in the intentional examination of their own experiences, practices, and reactions, is one strategy for supporting meaningful learning across the life span. Strategies for promoting reflection have already been addressed in *Promoting Lifelong Learning: Encouraging Reflection* (*Training Solutions*, January 2007). Once a learner has reflected on an experience, examined personal feelings about it, and decided action is needed, he or she is ready to take the next step and participate in self-evaluation.

SELF-EVALUATION AND REFLECTION

Like reflection, self-evaluation promotes enhanced awareness of one's self and one's professional context (whether it be as an early childhood director, a teacher, or a trainer). Motivation to pursue self-assessment often emerges as a result of reflection having led the learner to understand his or her specific strengths and needs in a specific skill area.

While reflection and self-evaluation are connected, the focus of each is unique. The primary function of reflection is the development of understanding; self-evaluation is focused on judging the quality of work based on clearly established standards. Reflection does not always lead to or involve self-evaluation. However, when participating in self-evaluation, the learner must

also engage in reflection to develop an authentic picture of current performance.

SELF-EVALUATION CRITERIA AND STANDARDS

Self-evaluation helps learners analyze and judge their work according to clearly stated criteria and standards. The "work" to be evaluated includes knowledge acquisition, the ability to use new practices, and often the learning process itself. The criteria or standards used in this analysis must be firmly grounded in the early childhood field and recommended practice. To support purposeful self-evaluation during training, learning goals established for a workshop or course should clearly be tied to the same criteria and standards that will be used for self-evaluation.

Initially, the trainer plays a key role in helping establish the performance criteria for self-evaluation. After individuals gain experience and expertise in the topic area, they become ready to take an active role in establishing criteria for themselves. Learners' eventual participation in identifying criteria on their own is critical to supporting lifelong learning. When learners begin to develop evaluation criteria for themselves (based on what is known in their field about best practice), they are truly empowered to use self-evaluation as a tool for their own personal learning.

[Self-evaluation] is one of the major means by which self-initiated learning becomes also responsible learning. ~ Carl Rogers

SELF-EVALUATION SKILLS

Self-evaluation is a critical lifelong learning tool. Ongoing use of self-evaluation allows the process to become a habit and increases the likelihood that the individual will continue to learn after basic training requirements have been met. While lifelong learning can be considered a disposition (an inherent tendency in the learner), self-evaluation involves a set of skills and a way of thinking about the teaching/learning process. The set of skills and dispositions needed for effective self-evaluation include:

~ Self-reflection Self-evaluation is the outcome of meaningful reflection on your abilities, practices, and results for better or worse.

~ Motivation to Change When there is a need for change, motivation to take action and willingness to try another strategy or method is critical. Motivation can be enhanced by intrinsic and extrinsic incentives but cannot be forced.

~ Willingness to Take Risks Taking action often involves an element of risk and the probability of making mistakes before competency is achieved. When an individual is willing to experiment with a new idea or practice and continue the trial/error cycle until he or she is proficient, change is likely.

~ Awareness of Professional Standards/Criteria To be able to assess your early childhood knowledge, attitudes, or skills, you must know where to find evidence-based evaluation criteria and self-assessment tools. These materials will be most helpful when you want to customize the self-assessment process to meet your own, self-identified needs.

~ Respect for Feedback In addition to self-evaluation, feedback from parents, children, peers, teachers, and supervisors can offer unparalleled opportunities for growth. When solicited or unsolicited input is weighed in the context of your self-assessment, it provides the double-check you may need to measure the integrity and accuracy of your conclusions.

BENEFITS OF SELF-EVALUATION

Once learned, conscious self-evaluation both promotes and improves your ability to engage in the process across a lifetime. Here is a list of the primary benefits

of self-evaluation:

~ Promotes ownership Self-evaluation helps place the responsibility for growth and development on the learner; it clearly links judgment about performance to professional criteria rather than to the preferences of supervisors or others in power. Self-evaluation is seen as a natural part of an effective learning process and the inherent responsibility of an effective learner. When early childhood professionals own the learning process, they become better consumers of training. As better consumers, they are more likely to continue learning when the formal training session is over.

~ Highlights learning processes and outcomes Self-evaluation focuses attention on both the learning process and outcomes. When used effectively, criteria for self-evaluation include clearly stated learning outcomes (what will the learner be able to understand or do) as well as descriptions of effective learning processes. These might include criteria for the process of editing a professional paper, how to use critical thinking to expand the scope of a position statement, or even the skills of cooperation as a component of the collaboration process.

The developmental chart below represents one way for participants to assess their use of cooperation skills during a team activity:

Measure: At the end of this session, you will be able to use cooperation as you collaborate in your team at either level 3 or level 4.
Level 1: Does nothing to encourage or support the efforts of team members.
Level 2: Interferes with team member's ability to work together.
Level 3: Contributes to the team; follows other team members' leads.
Level 4: Helps the team work together for success; encourages and supports the efforts of other team members.

Attention to learning processes is particularly important when working with adults who have been educated through traditional methods in which the teacher controls both the teaching and evaluation processes. A lecture and final test approach to teaching falls into this category. Copious amounts of information are

presented, and students must “guess” what is important. No criteria is shared about how success will be measured or how the test will be administered (essay? multiple choice? true/false?). Students feel “lucky” if they do well and “unlucky” if they do poorly. Neither the lucky nor the unlucky students learn or practice meaningful processes for continuing to learn.

~ Emphasizes learning goals Clearly stated criteria form the foundation for self-evaluation. This means the trainer must have clearly established and defined outcomes for a professional development session. Defining learning outcomes helps trainers a) limit the number of objectives expected to be accomplished in any one session, b) examine the significance of the content they plan, and c) forces them to link the session to best practice in the field. Effective learning goals clarify what will be taught and help both the trainer and the learner develop clear expectations for the session and next steps.

~ Builds a sense of competence Self-evaluation clearly links learning success to a path of engagement in the learning process, hard work, and meaningful outcomes. Learners feel a sense of direction and motivation because they understand where their efforts are leading. They see that evaluation is not a personal assessment of their worth or innate ability but rather part of an effective learning process.

~ Promotes self-efficacy Self-evaluation is a skill that develops over time and produces momentum. As a professional gains competence in the field through learning and practice, they assume increasing responsibility for setting evaluation criteria for themselves. In this way, they truly develop a process that serves them well across a lifetime.

SELF-EVALUATION AND TRAINING

Self-evaluation is an invaluable process that maximizes the outcomes of early childhood professional development. Even trainers who are involved in this process themselves sometimes fail to include opportunities for participant self-evaluation in training sessions. If you imagine participants taking what they are learning and embedding it in their daily work with young children, you will want to promote self-evaluation during training no matter what the topic. Using the following elements can guarantee that self-evaluation is a positive conse-

quence of your training sessions.

A. Make Self-evaluation Safe

One of the first requirements for effectively promoting self-evaluation is making the process and results safe. The results of self-evaluation cannot be tied to pay raises, final grades, or promotions. While an individual may be held accountable for progress made toward meeting self-identified goals, the honest appraisal of both strengths and weaknesses must be encouraged. In some cases, participants should have the right to choose to keep the self-evaluation process and the results confidential. Trainers can do a great deal to make self-evaluation safe during their sessions by including the following practices:

~ Model self-evaluation. Talk about what you learned in your last training workshop or in your reading that helped you improve today's session. Talk about how you use self-evaluation to change your own teaching practice in an early childhood setting.

~ Regularly remind participants of the frequently quoted expression “nobody's perfect!” It is assumed that no one knows everything and, in fact, no one ever will! We are all learning.

B. Actively Teach Self-evaluation Skills

A second requirement for promoting the use of self-evaluation is to actually teach self-evaluation skills. It is not enough to simply ask beginners to jot down a quick self-assessment. They may never have had the opportunity to learn or use this practice. In fact, the practice of self-evaluation is often the antitheses of the educational practices they have experienced. You may need to actively “market” self-evaluation before using it!

C. Help Participants Understand Why

Participants will be more amenable to learning these skills and using self-evaluation if they understand why you use self-evaluation as a component of your training. Buy-in increases when you actually involve the learner in setting the criteria for self-evaluation as much as possible. While you may begin by developing an evaluation form that includes a clear statement of criteria, you can ask participants if they have something to add.

As knowledge of best practice/standards grows, allow participants to play a larger role in setting evaluation criteria. Excellent criteria on ten NAEYC early childhood program standards can be found in NAEYC Early

Childhood Program Standards and Accreditation Criteria (effective September 16, 2006). Further, the Montana Early Care and Education Knowledge Base (ECP, 2004) is based on assessment of critical skills and knowledge for early childhood practitioners.

D. Provide Encouragement and Feedback

Provide encouragement and descriptive comments about the self-evaluation processes you see individuals using as they work in small groups or other learning activities. If more formal feedback is required (as in a university course), give students the criteria you will use for evaluation and refer to that criteria when you give feedback. Both formal and informal evaluation should be predictable and consistently given over time, not just at the beginning and end of the learning experience.

You don't learn from your experience. You learn from processing your experience. ~ John Dewey

CONCLUSION

Remember to practice what you teach. Engage in self-evaluation to enjoy the learning process as a trainer.

Carefully review participant feedback as well as your personal observations and perceptions during and after a training activity and use it to inform your practice. Continuously identify your own strengths and establish goals for improving the training process. ~

RESOURCES*

* NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards and Accreditation Criteria. NAEYC (effective September 16, 2006). Explicit program standards for early childhood programs serving children from birth through kindergarten with accreditation criteria for each of the program standards that is evidence-based and current with the profession's knowledge of best practice.

* Montana Early Care and Education Knowledge Base: A guide to early care and education professional practice: What early childhood practitioners who work with young children and families need to know, understand, and be able to do (December 2004). MSU-Bozeman: Montana Early Childhood Project. This tool is the basis for self-assessment and reflection around nine key early childhood content areas.

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