

Elevating Extension Educational Program Impact

There is confusion about what to measure to demonstrate that an educational program's impact extends beyond the learner's professional development, producing positive outcomes in the workplace and ultimately contributing to the improvement of environmental, social, and economic conditions. The Learning-Transfer Evaluation Model was introduced as a metric to measure the transfer of learning to individuals after completing a training program. The model has eight levels:

1. attendance
2. activity
3. learner perceptions
4. knowledge
5. decision-making competence
6. task competence
7. transfer
8. effects of transfer

However, this model could also be used to identify what educators can do at each level to promote the transfer of learning. The purpose of this publication is to share some strategies that Extension professionals can practice before, during, and after a program to elevate the training's impact and ultimately contribute to improving Extension's public value.

The Learning-Transfer Evaluation Model



Source: Thalheimer (2018).

Attendance

Attendance is the first level of learning transfer. Attendance includes signing up for programs, starting trainings, sitting through the learning environment, and completing learning experiences. Before trainings, some key elements can improve attendance.

Conducting a needs assessment can confirm the need for an educational program. Various outreach and marketing approaches (e.g., social media, word of mouth, or personalized messages) can be used to increase accessibility and attendance. It is important to assess the availability of resources required for the training (e.g., available funds). Educators should be aware of culturally responsive practices. The selection of location and timing can influence attendance numbers.

During the training, act and speak in ways that foster a sense of belonging to help attendees stay engaged. Understand learners' characteristics (e.g., age, gender, and background) so you can engage in informal conversations with them at the beginning or during breaks. Accommodating learners' requests is also an essential strategy for improving attendance numbers.

After trainings, it's important to deliberately strengthen relationships by following up with learners (via text message, email, or cold call) after several days to see how they are doing. At this level, you will count the number of learners who completed the training.

This level is inadequate to validate learning outcomes—because learners may attend but not learn.

Activity

The second level to consider is activity. You should plan and design educational activities that align with your learners' interests and enhance their attention and engagement. Here are several factors to consider:

- delivery method
- educator expertise
- learners' characteristics
- the learning context

During trainings, based on your observation of the room and how learners engage in the learning process, you might

start to adjust or replace some activities to match learners' learning styles and increase their engagement. You might seek feedback formally or informally from learners, such as asking about their opinions using an existing interview survey or gauging learning success by the "energy in the room" when learners are involved in conversation.

This level is also inadequate to validate learning outcomes—because learners may pay attention, show interest, and participate but not learn.

Learner Perceptions

Before planning and designing educational programs, it is important to emphasize the "why."

During the training, incorporate learners' past experiences and how they might relate to the training. Also share with learners the values and benefits the training will bring to them and the consequences of not taking action.

After trainings, you should report learners' motivation toward applying what they have learned, and measure their satisfaction with the training and whether they would recommend it to others.

Assessing this level can give us hints about learning outcomes, but it still does not provide the complete picture of learning transfer.

Knowledge

Learners can gain knowledge on instructional techniques, new processes to be adopted, or new terminology or concepts. So, when you write your learning objectives, consider the different levels of knowledge based on the purpose of the training (e.g., recall, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, and create; Bloom's taxonomy).

Make sure the content you share with learners is supported by evidence and details. For example, if the training is about leadership, you can share some success stories of leaders who have adopted certain leadership skills and illustrate the negative impact on organizations when leadership is absent. Or you could teach them leadership skills for specific situations, such as dealing with conflicts, to enrich their experiences.

The common way to measure gained knowledge is to measure learners' knowledge recitation during or right after the training. Alternatively, you could measure their knowledge retention several days after the training. Again, it depends on the purpose of the training.

Keep in mind that knowing and remembering concepts does not necessarily lead to performance.

Decision-Making Competence

Learning aims to help people make better decisions, which will improve their behaviors. For example, training people to be better supervisors should help them make better decisions when they are leading and interacting with their employees.

At a minimum, you should design learning in a way that leverages decision-making skills. For example, present learners with scenarios based on real situations and ask them how they would act in each.

During or immediately after the training, evaluate learners' decision-making competencies and share constructive feedback.

At this level, you can connect a competency to work performance.

Task Competence

If you want to improve learners' ability to demonstrate task competence right after the training, give them opportunities to perform relevant tasks and make decisions. You can use the SEDA model to incorporate relevant action and decision-making scenarios for learners: present a situation and allow them to evaluate it, decide on a specific action, and then act.

For example, if your goal is to help learners give effective presentations, you should provide them with strategies for using PowerPoint, content to teach, information about the potential learners, and specific learning goals to achieve.

Then, let the learners decide how to create a PowerPoint presentation and present it to some simulated trainees (maybe their fellow learners or other professionals).

During or after the training, measure learners' ability to act and make corresponding decisions. The point at this level is that the tasks comprise both decision-making and action-taking.

Keep in mind that learners may become competent in decision-making skills, but they may struggle to implement a chosen decision. Learners become task-competent when they can decide and then act based on that decision.

Transfer

You can determine that learning transfer has occurred if the following two criteria are met:

1. Learners have previously engaged in a learning experience, ranging from the attendance level to the task competence level.
2. Learners have used what they've learned in their professional/ personal life.

There are two phases of transfer—assisted transfer and full transfer. If learners still need assistance to perform in the real context, they have reached assisted transfer. If learners become fully prepared to transfer learning to their workplace without additional assistance, they have reached full transfer.

Effects of Transfer

In this final level, you collect evidence that the learning extends beyond learner benefits to societal benefits (i.e., Extension public value). Organizations can reach this level when they consider learning as a means to other ends. In other words, they focus not only on learners acquiring skills but also on how they will apply those skills to achieve significant outcomes, ultimately enhancing social, environmental, and economic conditions.

References

Krathwohl, D. R. (2002). A revision of Bloom's taxonomy: An overview. *Theory Into Practice*, 41(4), 212–218.

Thalheimer, W. (2018). The learning-transfer evaluation model: Sending messages to enable learning effectiveness.

Elevating Extension Educational Program Impact Checklist

ATTENDANCE

Before Training

- Assess the need for training
- Use a wide range of outreach and marketing approaches
- Assess the resources needed for training
- Be aware of culturally responsive practices
- Be strategic in choosing training location and time

During Training

- Create an inclusive environment
- Consider learner characteristics
- Build relationships
- Observe attendance numbers

After Training

- Strengthen relationships
- Follow up with learners
- Check that learners complete learning experiences

ACTIVITY

Before Training

- Plan/design activities that align with learners' interests
- Plan/design activities that increase learners' attention
- Plan/design activities that increase learners' engagement and participation

During Training

- Consider learner characteristics
- Observe learners' engagement in the learning process
- Be prepared with backup activities to match learners' learning styles

After Training

- Seek feedback from learners regarding the delivery methods

LEARNER PERCEPTIONS

Before Training

- Plan and design training with a strong emphasis on "why"
 - Why is this important to learners?
 - Why should they pay attention to this?
 - Why is it valuable to them?
 - Why will they need to apply this in their work?

During Training

- Incorporate emotional experiences into the learning process, including past experiences, benefits, potential challenges, value, and more

After Training

- Measure learners' satisfaction
- Report learners' motivation to apply what they have learned

KNOWLEDGE

Before Training

- Plan and design training with solid, relevant information
 - What does the information tell learners?
 - What data exist to support this information?
 - Incorporate different knowledge levels from Bloom's taxonomy when creating the learning objectives (e.g., recall, understand, etc.)

During Training

- Incorporate knowledge experiences into the learning process, including detailed instructions, evidence based on research, and more

After Training

- Measure learners' knowledge recitation (*during or right after learning*)
- Measure learners' knowledge retention (*after several days or more*)

DECISION-MAKING COMPETENCE

Before Training

- Plan and design training that is built around how well it supports learners in gaining decision-making competence

During Training

- Incorporate relevant, realistic scenarios and practices into the learning process, including simulations, scenario-based decision-making, real-world scenarios, and more

After Training

- Measure learners' decision-making competence (*during or right after learning*)

TASK COMPETENCE

Before Training

- Plan and design training that is built around giving learners the opportunity to perform relevant, realistic actions and make decisions

During Training

- Incorporate relevant, realistic actions and decision-making opportunities into the learning process (e.g., use the SEDA model)

After Training

- Measure learners' ability to act after they've made a decision (*during or right after learning and after several days or more*)

TRANSFER

After Training

- Measure learners' ability to use what was learned to perform work tasks successfully—as clearly demonstrated through objective measures (*after several days or more*)

EFFECTS OF TRANSFER

After Training

- Measure effects of transfer including outcomes affecting learners, coworkers/family/friends, the organization, the community, society, and the environment (impact beyond learners)

Notes

Publication 4011 (POD-07-24)

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Extension Service of Mississippi State University, cooperating with U.S. Department of Agriculture. Published in furtherance of Acts of Congress, May 8 and June 30, 1914. ANGUS L. CATCHOT JR., Director