



Right timing in formative program evaluation



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ABSTRACT

Since many educational researchers and program developers have limited knowledge of formative evaluation, formative data may be underutilized during the development and implementation of an educational program. The purpose of this article is to explain how participatory, responsive, educative, and qualitative approaches to formative evaluation can facilitate a partnership between evaluators and educational researchers and program managers to generate data useful to inform program implementation and improvement. This partnership is critical, we argue, because it enables an awareness of when to take appropriate action to ensure successful educational programs or “kairos”. To illustrate, we use examples from our own evaluation work to highlight how formative evaluation may facilitate opportune moments to (1) define the substance and purpose of a program, (2) develop understanding and awareness of the cultural interpretations of program participants, and (3) show the relevance of stakeholder experiences to program goals.

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1. Introduction

Educational researchers who design programs, as well as managers responsible for implementation, are typically required by funding agencies to submit summative evaluations to determine the extent to which program objectives were met. While summative evaluations supported by quantified evidence are important, they are inadequate to provide information about program implementation decisions or how outcomes transpired (Patton, 2002). In contrast, formative evaluations that are conducted during the course of development or program delivery (Mathison, 2005) provide information on how a program is unfolding so that midcourse corrections can be made. Although formative evaluations provide process information that can illuminate potential and actual implementation progress (Stetler et al., 2006), formative data are frequently underutilized. In this paper we argue for the value of incorporating formative evaluation practices throughout the life of a program; rather than simply as a procedural checkpoint after the program has been designed. That is, we argue for the importance of deliberately fostering opportunities for educational researchers, program managers, and evaluators to work collaboratively in ways

that position formative data as central to program and evaluation design and implementation. However, we realize that even when such opportunities are encouraged, formative evaluations are often challenged by program design, context and implementation. When faced with these challenges, we have found ourselves taking action and then reflecting on how our evaluations could have been done differently. These events and wonderings brought to our attention the intersections of formative evaluation program theory and practice. Our reflections on our actions during program evaluations has reaffirmed the importance of right timing as well as how participatory, responsive, educative, and qualitative approaches can be operationalized in formative evaluation.

Accordingly, this paper aims to reinvigorate the value and potential of formative evaluation by reporting on what we have learned. To do this, we provide empirical examples from our formative evaluation work. These examples serve three main purposes. The first is to highlight the intersections of formative program evaluation theory and practice with attention to the aforementioned evaluation approaches. The second purpose of the examples is to introduce the notion of right timing or kairos. We find Aaron Hess's (2011) description of the Greek term kairos as “timeliness of speech” (p. 138) helpful in thinking about formative program evaluation's potential. In our application of kairos to the evaluation process, evaluators become keenly attuned to identifying precise moments in which decisions about actions must be taken to foster success. In other words, formative evaluators have the opportunity to focus on decision-making concerning appropriate

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action at the right time, in a specific context, across the life of a project. By examining these opportune moments in detail, evaluators seek to elicit information on how both program implementation and evaluation are affected by and need to respond to context-specific issues as they become visible. We acknowledge that the approaches to evaluation we highlight in this article, including *kairos*, do not necessarily guarantee desired outcomes. That being the case, the third purpose of our examples is to describe how the formative evaluations described could have been strengthened had we thought more clearly about the relationship between the program design, its implementation, and formative evaluation.

Before reflecting on examples from our evaluation work to show possible ways formative evaluators might use *kairos* to inform the development and implementation of educational programs, we first describe the literature on formative evaluation, highlighting its essential purposes and interdependent approaches.

2. Formative program evaluation

Formative program evaluation is premised on the assumption that both programs and evaluations are designs in and of themselves and that attention should be paid to their components. That is, they need to be developed, re-examined and assessed. It is the process of thoughtfully considering and reconsidering how program and evaluation design elements function and relate to each other that is at the heart of effective formative program evaluations. Similarly to Maxwell (2005), we believe formative evaluation does not assume any particular ordering of design components. Rather, it focuses on the ways in which the evaluation and program designs interact and evolve as a result of the partnership established between the evaluator, educational researchers or managers, and other relevant stakeholders. However, we believe that for this partnership to be beneficial, evaluators need to be mindful of multiple interdependent features of the evaluation–program interaction in a way that fosters opportunities to communicate or intervene at opportune moments. These four approaches support each other while also focusing on specific aspects of the evaluator–stakeholder relationship. Table 1 provides an overview of the interacting formative program evaluation approaches.

First, and most importantly, we argue, a *participatory* approach to formative program evaluation is imperative. Participatory-based evaluations assume that some form of collaboration between evaluators, program managers, and other program stakeholders will advance a project's practical or transformative aims (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998). For example, theorists argue that such partnerships can promote the utilization of evaluation findings (Patton, 1997), contribute to better alignment between program design and the contextual realities of program

implementation (Huebner, 2000), and aid in consensus-building of diverse stakeholder groups for effective program planning (Chacón-Moscoso, Anguera-Argilaga, Pérez-Gil, & Holgado-Tello, 2002). We believe that formative evaluation should build on these assumptions while also fostering a particular kind of collaborative relationship. Like Rolfsen and Torvatn (2005), formative evaluators understand that relationship-building and effective communication go hand in hand. As multiple parties gain an understanding of what each contributes to program and evaluation development, they are more able to identify and communicate with each other the kinds of information that are mutually beneficial to the collaboration (Chacón-Moscoso et al., 2002; see column 1, Table 1).

Second, a *responsive* approach to formative evaluation is needed to demonstrate and deepen cultural and contextual receptivity. While creating a program design and plan to systematically document the program are valuable activities, all aspects of an evaluation design cannot be predetermined as a “consequence of contextual realities” (Chatterji, 2005, p. 17), and therefore must be responsive; that is, open to change as the program design unfolds (Patton, 2002). Furthermore, Weston (2004) noted that contextual dimensions (i.e., policies, geographical settings, etc.) and cultural dimensions (i.e., values, customs, etc.) can interact with program designs in unforeseen ways, revealing points of disconnection between a local context and the design of a program (AEA, 2011). Formative data generated are central to being culturally and contextually responsive, since they can be used to attend to and make valid inferences about unanticipated conflicts and events, and the ways in which program objectives are articulated and accomplished within and across stakeholder groups and program activities (Patton, 2002; Stetler et al., 2006). Thus, formative evaluators seek ways to bring understanding and awareness to how contextual and cultural dimensions interact with program and evaluation designs (see column 2, Table 1).

Third, because formative evaluation is based on a partnership, *educative* opportunities can serve to help educational researchers, program managers, and evaluators critically reflect on and learn from the interactions between program and evaluation designs (Preskill, 2008; Torres & Preskill, 2001). Thus our notion of educative reflects two related but distinct ideas. First, the “evaluator accepts that a significant part of her or his role is to promote greater understanding of the program [design] and its context among program staff, participants, and other stakeholders” (Greene, DeStefano, Burgon, & Hall, 2006, p. 56). Second, through the process of learning about and communicating understandings of the program, the evaluator increases her or his capacity to design and implement an evaluation that yields contextually relevant actionable data (i.e., for mid-course corrections, voicing diverse perspectives, dealing with sensitive topics,

Table 1
Essential approaches to formative program evaluation.

Approach	Participatory	Responsive	Educative	Qualitative
Purpose	To build rapport, collaborative decision making, and common ground	To demonstrate cultural and contextual receptivity	To foster communicative exchanges that promote learning about program and evaluation that informs development and implementation	To participate in discovery and meaning making as it is occurring
Characteristics	Collaborative Dialogical Mutually beneficial Engaged	Reflexive Attentive Aware	Analytic Illuminative Judicial Transformative	Naturalistic Emergent Experiential Interpretive
Desired Outcome	Genuine, authentic partnership	Methodological revision, adaptation and flexibility to respond to emergent issues	Mutual understanding of program and evaluation that fosters capacity building	Thick descriptions of program and evaluation implementation and practice that yield complex understandings of phenomena

Note: This chart presents the evaluation approaches needed to strengthen *kairos* in formative evaluation.

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