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How Are We Doing? A Corporate Strategy For Finding Out

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by *Susan Mueller*

A corporate assessment model offers a fresh approach to evaluating consultant training programs and consultations themselves.



Susan Mueller

How many times have you watched struggling students leave your writing center and wondered how much they got out of the conference you just had with them? It is hard to know. Even if they listened and paid attention, even if they made all of the changes you suggested and successfully revised their papers, did they really learn anything? Will their next papers be better for the time you just spent with them? Does the training you receive translate into better consultations for writers? These are evaluation questions. Evaluation is perhaps the most elusive aspect of writing center work, and there are many theories about how to do it, some too complicated and too abstract to be easily implemented. Corporate America may have a simpler way to do evaluation. Donald L. Kirkpatrick's book, *Evaluating Corporate Training Programs: The Four Levels*, provides us with a simple and straightforward model to evaluate the work we do.

Kirkpatrick's Four Levels

In 1959, Kirkpatrick, then on the faculty of the University of Wisconsin, published a series of four articles that outlined a new schema for evaluating corporate training, brilliant in its simplicity and universal applicability. Its premise is simple: to be effective, training must work at different levels over a span of time (Alliger and Janak 332-3). As a result, training must be measured in several different ways and at several different points in time in order to gauge its true value to the organization.

Kirkpatrick posited that in order to evaluate training programs, four measurements must be taken: trainees' experience of the training, either positive or negative (*reaction*); knowledge and skills gained by the trainees (*learning*); any improvements to the trainees' job performance (*behavior*); and impact on the organization itself, such as increased profit or productivity (*results*). The chart below illustrates his four levels:

Four Levels of Evaluation

- Level 1: Reaction
Did participants enjoy the training?
- Level 2: Learning
What did participants learn?
- Level 3: Behavior
Did participants apply what they learned to their jobs?
- Level 4: Results
Did the training result in improved organizational performance?
(Kirkpatrick)

For example, if an organization is training its employees on a new software program, level 1 evaluation would occur in the last moments of the training when the instructor passes out a questionnaire designed to determine how well the participants liked the training and the instructor. Deemed "smile sheets," these evaluations measure how enjoyable the training was for the participants and whether they think it was worthwhile (Clementz 2). Predicated on the premise that people can learn only in a positive environment, level 1 evaluations (*reactions*) are easy to obtain and are painless for participants (Alliger and Janak 333).

Level 2 evaluations (*learning*) tell evaluators what participants learned. These are tests over content given immediately after training. Level 2 can be either pencil-and-paper tests or performance tests. A performance test might ask the participants to create a chart or produce a diagram using the software. This demonstrates that learning has taken place, that participants have acquired new knowledge or skills as a result of the training.

Level 3 evaluations (*behavior*) measure how this training changed employees' performance on the job. Measured by observations or interviews with supervisors and employees, this examines employees' behavior for training-related changes (Burrow and Bernardinelli 3). The hypothetical example looks at how often employees actually used the new software and whether they successfully incorporated it into their daily routines. Level 3 measurements are conducted at predetermined intervals (e.g., 3 months) and may be repeated several times.

Level 4 evaluations (*results*) look at the impact of the training on the organization. Has the training resulted in performance improvements that saved money? Increased productivity? Reduced errors? These also can only be measured after some time has elapsed. It is important to note that level 4 evaluations are never pure (Burrow and Bernardinelli 8). Both because of the time interval between training and measurement and because of the global organizational focus, other factors can impact these outcomes. At best, level 4 evaluations will yield only a likelihood about training's impact on the corporate bottom line (Alliger and Janak 333).

Writing Center Evaluation

That's nice, you say, but how does it apply to writing centers?

Admittedly, Kirkpatrick's model was intended for an industrial setting, but there are many parallels between his idea of training and our tutor/consulting/coaching training programs and our work with students. All aim to bring about new skills and understanding and to change students' and consultants' *behavior*. This shared aspect is where Kirkpatrick's work can have meaning for us. It gives us a new tool to look at the effect that our writing center conferences have on students' writing and the effect training has on you as a consultant.

The keys to using Kirkpatrick's model lie in what to look for and when. Take, for example, a training session given for writing center staff on a particular kind of assignment. In such a session, participants are taught the important characteristics of the assignment, perhaps what the common errors are, and ways to address them with students. If you are the presenter, observe the participants over the course of the session. Did they enjoy the training (level 1)? Second, do some role-playing as part of the activity. Did the participants know what to do? Did they do it with minimal intervention on your part? (level 2). Observing their sessions with students later, after some time has passed, can tell you whether they have incorporated the concepts into their sessions with students (level 3).

Looking at the information we get back from students can also give us a snapshot of our impact. Look at what students say in the evaluations they complete at the end of their sessions. Do they report that the training was helpful? Did they think you were helpful and knowledgeable? Once again, the answers to these questions are level 1 evaluations. They will tell you how students *reacted* to the writing session you had with them. Does your writing center do any follow up with participants? If so, what do students report over time about how writing center conferences have improved their writing? Did their grades go up? Do they feel more confident about what to write? Do they come back to your writing center? Answering yes to these questions indicates that they have learned (level 2) and applied what they learned (level 3) in your sessions with them. Once again, the more specific the information you can gather, the more it will reveal about the strengths and weaknesses of your work.

Level 3

The question of changed behavior is important (level 3). This is the objective of writing centers—to change students' writing behavior. As you work with a student whom you have seen before, ask this question: what changed? Look at the work, and take an internal measure of what you remember of the last session/paper. Is this paper better organized? Does it have a stronger thesis? Did technical errors decrease (e.g., fewer comma splices)? Once again, the issue is whether that student incorporated his or her learning into that next paper. Chat with the student about the writing process. Was this paper easier to write? In what ways? Does this information relate to what you did in your previous sessions? Those are level 3 evaluation indicators (*behavior*).

Even though Kirkpatrick's model wasn't intended to evaluate more subjective dimensions like tone or voice, you can still apply the general theory to these areas. Did the student writer incorporate the strategies or suggestions you made? Did the tone improve as a result? Is it consistent from paper to paper? The change in the student's writing is the focus here.

Level 4

Level 4 (*results*) cannot be directly transplanted into an academic environment; measures of profit and productivity don't fit us. However, we can examine the data we have in the light of Kirkpatrick's model. Most writing centers keep track of students and information about them. These can give us some results of our work.

- How many of your students return?
- How many referrals have you had?
- How many complaints?

In conclusion, Kirkpatrick's model can provide you with a tool to better understand the impact of your time with students. Begin each session with a clear idea of what you want to accomplish. Then look to see what evolves from that. You should–

- Focus on specific elements in each paper and session rather than general ones.
- Watch for these same indicators in later papers at later times (e.g., 3 months).
- If your writing center doesn't do this already, implement an exit survey for students to complete after each consultation
- Keep track of which students return, how often, and what they bring in.
- Use these findings to tailor your future sessions with all students.

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