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Evaluation: The Bright, Illuminating Principle of Teaching and Learning

January 13, 2021 | By Matthew Barclay
Instructional Design

A few years ago, the planet Pluto was downgraded to “dwarf planet” status. Pluto is a small body made up of rock and ice, located billions of miles from the sun (Nasa, 2012). In other words, it’s a cold and rocky place, of little significance, far from the center of the system. This sounds like a description of evaluation in the realm of teaching and learning—at least a description of how evaluation is often treated.

Anyone in this profession, including students of instructional design, know that evaluation is an integral part of what we do. They also know that despite its importance, evaluation very often gets ignored and shunned. Why?

Evaluation takes extra time and money. It also takes people who really know what they’re doing. Now, I just wrote that evaluation takes “extra” time and money, and that probably sounds normal. But why do we often describe the time and money needed for evaluation with the adjective “extra?” Does analysis take “extra” time? Does design take “extra” money? We never describe the other pieces of instructional design as requiring anything extra. Why treat evaluation as an afterthought or a luxury? Perhaps it is because even without evaluation, an organization can design, develop, and implement a product—get it to market—without seriously evaluating it.

In common mentality and practice, evaluation, like Pluto, only rarely comes close to the center of everything that’s happening. But in true teaching and learning, evaluation is not the dwarf planet Pluto of the design system. Rather, it is more like the sun.

Think about the sun. You can’t ignore it. If you do, sooner or later you will get scorched. And if you retreat from it you’ll find yourself continuously in the dark. Evaluation, when done right, shines essential light and meaning on everything we do in teaching and learning. Evaluation is needed in analysis, design, and every other phase of a project, whether you follow ADDIE, SAM, or another process.

To treat evaluation like Pluto rather than the sun is to be product-centered rather than learner-centered. To be product-centered is to be far from the center of what matters most in teaching and learning.

Take a look at the following quotes about evaluation:

“What is measured is often what ends up being valued, so be sure your measures reflect what you want the students to learn” (McKeachie and Svinicki, 2006).

“One of the great mistakes is to judge policies and programs by their intentions rather than their results” (Friedman, 1975).

“Once you decide to teach something, several kinds of activity are required if your instruction is to be successful... first you decide where you want to go, then you create and administer the means of getting there, and then you arrange to find out whether you arrived” (Mager, 1997, pp 1-2, emphasis added).

What quotes can you find about the importance of evaluation in teaching and learning? Share them here. What does (or what could) evaluation bring to your organization, not in theory but in reality?

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