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Faces Can Tell Us Lots!

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Abstract

We are all asked to be accountable for the work that we do. As we continue to evaluate our programs and measure their impact, valuable evaluation strategies continue to surface. Evaluating young people can be extremely challenging. This holds especially true for young people under the age of 10 years. However, there are dynamic programs going on with this age group. One method that is being used as an attitude assessment using "three faces." This article discusses how "three faces" can be used to evaluate programs for young people.

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Introduction

"Evaluation" and "accountability" are two words that all of us constantly hear in Cooperative Extension. As we continue to measure change in knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs, best practices, or behavior, there are numerous, even countless, strategies we can develop to effectively measure change. In order to be more effective at measuring change, it is important to ask yourself several questions pertaining to your program. Some of these questions include:

1. What is it I am truly trying to measure?
2. Does it match my objectives?
3. Are these objectives written in a measurable way?
4. Who is my target audience?
5. Does this evaluation strategy coincide with my target audience?

There are many additional questions that could be asked in relation to developing education strategies and plenty of other articles that discuss approaches to responding to these questions.

This article focuses on question number five, "Does this evaluation strategy coincide with my target audience?" As an Extension Specialist in the area of Program Development, I am often asked about strategies to measure attitudes or behaviors in youth audiences. In addition, County Extension Agents have identified legitimate concerns associated with the "pen and pencil" approach with youth. Do young people (6-10 years old) truly know how to reply to Likert scaling systems like "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" or "I do this never" to "I do this always"?

Background of the Faces

A strategy that has been effective is one that uses different facial expressions. The most common "facial expression scale" is a basic three-point scale shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1.
Facial Expression Scale



Sad
Disagree



So-So
Uncertain



Happy
Agree

This scale has been effective at measuring youth attitudes on such topics as exercise, fruit and vegetable consumption, developing character, life skills development, reading, and writing.

It appears to be most effective when used as a pre-test, post-test approach. In other words, youth would be administered a pre-test before the program to get an idea of their attitudes about the subject matter. After the pre-test, these youth participants would go through the educational program. At the end of the program, youth participants would be given a post-test. This post-test would be an exact replica of the pretest.

Doing this, the evaluator is able to compare the attitudes of youth before the program compared to after the program. The change shown between the before and after indicates the change in attitude for the participants as a result of the educational program. It is important to note that you do not want to measure post-only. Measuring a one-shot post provides no comparisons. In other words, we do not know the youth's attitude toward a subject beforehand if it is not asked.

Ways to Administer

There are multiple approaches to administering the pre-test and post-test. No matter what method you use, the key is to have clear, concise directions, so that all participants understand what you are asking them to do. One method is to pass out a sheet of paper with question numbers and the three faces lined-up with each question number. The program evaluator reads the statement out loud to the participants, and they circle the appropriate face that matches their attitude toward the statement read. The evaluator read all the statements one by one, and the participant circles the faces for each statement and turn in the sheet after all the statements have been read.

A second method is for the program evaluator to draw the faces on a chalkboard or poster. Once these are drawn, the program evaluator reads the statement or question to the participants to ask their attitude. Then, he or she asks for a show of hands from the group for each of the three faces. The key to this is documenting accurately by counting the hands that are raised for each face for each statement/question. The disadvantage of this method is that it is not confidential. In other words, participants can be influenced by those around them.

The advantage to these two administrative strategies is that youth do not have to read the phrases. They simply react to the directions and the statements provided by the program evaluator. These methods have also been used with Spanish speaking audiences.

A traditional approach is to administer the "pencil and paper" approach by giving the pre-test and post-test on a sheet of paper, with the statements and faces on the sheet. If this method is selected, it is important that the participants can in fact read at the level at which the survey is written. In other words, if the paper survey is written at a 3rd grade level; do not administer it to 6-year-old kids.

Conclusion

Remember, this is just one evaluation example that can be used to document change. Certainly it is beneficial to those of us in Cooperative Extension who work with young audiences or audiences that do not like to complete a "traditional" survey-type instrument. Moreover, it works best with attitudes because facial expressions certainly do indicate a level of likeness that everyone can understand.

If this survey allows you to answer "Yes" to question 5, then maybe this is a strategy you can implement with your target audiences.

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