

The 2004 Canadian Evaluation Society Conference: Truly a Co-operative Enterprise!

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The 2004 annual national conference of the Canadian Evaluation Society (CES) entitled *“Evaluation: A Co-operative Enterprise”* was recently hosted in Saskatchewan for the first time ever (Saskatoon, May 16th-19th). Just as evaluation is a co-operative enterprise, so, too, is conference planning! The spirit of co-operation was exemplified in the organizing of this event, chaired by Dr. Alan Ryan (U of S) with Core Planning Committee members, Dr. Lori Ebbesen (Saskatchewan Health Research Foundation), Mr. John Marshall (Saskatoon Health Region), Mr. Grant Wood (U of S), Ms. Frankie Jordan (Saskatchewan Justice, CES National Vice-President) and Ms. Kari Nicolas (Conference Coordinator), and special contributions by the SK Chapter CES Executive, Dr. Peter Grant, Dr. David Rosenbluth, Ms. Felecia Watson, Mr. Terry Gibson, Mr. Gary Gehring, Ms. Trish Livingston, and Ms. Muriel Garven. Our intent in hosting this prestigious event was to showcase Saskatchewan in terms of talent, history, philosophy and culture. We selected a conference title and four themes that were both timely in the field of evaluation and clearly reflect Saskatchewan’s co-operative roots. Our four themes were:

- Working Intersectorally
- Working with Diverse Populations
- Expanding Methodological Horizons
- Building Evaluation Capacity

The conference was attended by a total of 258 delegates, national and international, representing various sectors and levels of government, business, consulting companies, and academia. As in other CES conferences, we offered a rich forum for the discussion of theoretical, philosophical and practical issues in evaluation through: eight pre-conference workshops; national meetings; keynote addresses by Dr. Janice MacKinnon, the Honourable Judge Gerald Morin and Dr. Ernest House; the annual student competition; poster sessions; and concurrent papers, panels and symposia. Organized social and other events available for delegates included: opening conference reception, morning fun run/walks and bird-watching tour, the ‘Boomtown Bash’ evening banquet at the Western Development Museum, the annual CES Awards Luncheon, a brew pub evaluation tour, evening hospitality suites and a book sale.

Conference Evaluation

Evaluation of the 2004 CES Conference adopted Donald Kirkpatrick’s four-level Framework for Evaluating Training (1975, 1992) as its theoretical guide: *reactions* to the event; *learning* before, during and/ or after the event; *behavior*, application in one’s own setting; and *results*, factors measurable and evident in the workplace. Our conference evaluation was designed, appropriately so, within the scope of levels one and two, *reactions* and *learning*. Participants at the conference were invited to complete written

evaluation forms that explored: impressions of and satisfaction with various aspects of the conference, key take-home messages, progress in learning, likes and dislikes, and suggestions for improvement. Two forms were used: a 'Daily Comments Sheet' specifically for Monday and Tuesday allowed comments about that particular day and suggestions to the Core Planning Committee regarding aspects we might quickly adjust to enhance the conference experience; and an overall 'Conference Reflections' captured more encompassing impressions of the conference.

Evaluation Findings

Response

Fifty-one Daily Comments Sheets were completed for Monday, 36 for Tuesday and 40 Conference Reflections were submitted. This response was comparable if not better than at previous CES conferences.

Reactions

Delegates indicated that conference sessions contributed to increased understanding, were relevant for the most part, and sparked ideas and thinking:

Sessions are always a hit and miss – but we pick certain ones so that they can apply to our work. I would be shocked if anyone says this conference didn't increase their knowledge or challenge them in some way.

There was a good variety of topics/ presentations which covered many important aspects of evaluation.

The most frequently reported highlights of this conference were:

- *Content* – Of particular note were the keynote speakers and the pre-conference workshops: *“The keynote speakers were fantastic! All equally good and among the best I've heard at CES.” “The keynotes were one of the best parts of the conference.” “Judge Morin was great.” “The last keynote, Dr. House was the most directly related to evaluation.” “Good selection of workshops.”*
- *Networking* – Delegates commented on the *“opportunity to network and converse with a diverse group of individuals with common interests,” “great socialization and networking,”* and *“meeting new people and learning from their experience.”*
- *Atmosphere* – This conference specifically and CES generally were complimented for their *“friendliness”* and *“camaraderie and supportiveness.”* The organization of the event was also appreciated: *“The workshops/ conference are overall well organized and well done.” “Things went very smoothly.”*

Not surprisingly, mixed reviews and criticisms specific to these highlights were also voiced. Additional criticisms included: limited emphasis on methodologies, little discussion about action steps, the lack of a 'meet and greet' for new CES members, and

multiple comments on poor acoustics and overheads during plenary and concurrent sessions.

Overall there were strong positive impressions regarding the conference being able to meet delegates' goals and objectives, provide useful information, and to enhance evaluation capacity. Conference themes were well received by delegates, concurrent sessions were rated moderately for overall quality and range of options, the quality of the poster session was rated fairly high, however, the range of options was not. The quality of the conference site rated above average and one participant was particularly astute in recognizing that "*Saskatchewan rocks!*"

Learning

Progress in learning at the event was moderate in evaluation theory, practice, recent developments, the theme areas, and in one's role as evaluator. Some of the key messages from the conference were emotive:

I am not alone in facing issues and challenges. Other evaluators feel like me – frustrated.

There is willingness among the evaluation community to 'admit' and then address troublesome areas like bias, ethics and values in a professional and respectful manner.

The conference has affirmed my desire to continue in a career as an evaluator.

Content-related messages were evident and included: qualitative methods, risks to internal evaluators, inductive analysis, negotiating an evaluation before it begins, capacity building and measuring it within organizations, and building intersectoral partnerships.

Some delegates commented on an increased appreciation for the diversity of evaluation practice and issues therein:

Evaluation is very diverse and means many different things to different people.

Evaluators do not seem to be using theoretical frameworks to establish evaluation designs. While innovating methodologically, evaluators are not generally questioning the value-base upon which the programs are founded. The question of theoretical and value foundations goes to the heart of the issue of evaluation relevance.

The broader context within which we evaluate was noted: "*Evaluation is political. Values are at play behind the scenes. Finding common ground is important.*" The requisite skills and abilities to work within this broad context were also recognized:

We need to build evaluation capacity and have more training.

We need to be more wide ranged in what we typically evaluate (i.e., attention to program rationale, relevance, policy basis).

Consistent with the title of the conference, some participants noted the importance of looking at and approaching evaluation as a co-operative enterprise:

We need to work more horizontally and with more partners.

Cooperation and communication are key to a successful evaluation.

Suggestions for Improvement

Suggestions for improving this conference arose for logistics (e.g., enforcing a no cell phone policy) and for concurrent session processes (e.g., allowing questions after each presentation, dealing with 'no-shows').

When asked about what participants would like to see at future conferences, general – rather than specific – suggestions were offered and included: more advanced level workshops, more opportunity for 'hands on' learning, fewer session choices and more in depth sessions, and more debate to stimulate the exchange of ideas between celebrity evaluators and other participants.