

GOODMAN RESEARCH GROUP, INC. PERSPECTIVES

Evaluation and Research News From Cambridge, MA

Spring 2008

Greetings from the President



In January 2009, Goodman Research Group, Inc. (GRG) will celebrate our 20th anniversary as a full-service research evaluation firm. This seems like a good time to revisit several of the questions we generally ask our clients and ourselves as we conduct evaluations. These questions represent some of the opportunities and challenges that have remained constant in our work, as we adjust to ongoing changes in the economic, political, social, and educational environments.

What is a realistic goal? An important part of our discussion with a client is to investigate the beliefs they have about their program, as well as perceptions about its intended effects. Although the program world has become more sophisticated about a program's "theory of change," too often a program lacks articulated goals, or else the goals and objectives that do exist are not realistic. The ideal is to have a match between the type and level of program activities and the desired outcomes.

What is appropriate? As time goes on, we've seen more emphasis on the need for accountability and the importance of measuring project impact. These are good things. However, the current emphasis on experimental and quasi-experimental designs, and on assessing specific content through use of standardized tests, sometimes leads to programs being evaluated rigorously before they are mature enough to provide meaningful impact data. The aim should be to select the most rigorous design appropriate for a project's current stage and scope. A challenge is to meet the funders' requirements, while at the same time providing information that is useful to the client for improving their program.

What is in the black box? We believe strongly that one should examine the processes as well as program outcomes. Probing inside the "black box" (how the program unfolds and whether it does what it said it would) helps us to

understand and interpret outcomes. A challenge with some clients is to convince them of the usefulness of this evaluation component.

What is authentic? An exciting challenge for us is assessing impacts in a relevant, realistic, and fun way. Because of the usual time and budget constraints, we – like many evaluators – often have respondents report their own perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. However, we are always working to push the envelope to find measures that flow seamlessly from the project. Authentic assessment is an increasingly valued approach to evaluate a program's success, as described by Karen Peterman on page 3 of this newsletter.

What is affordable? In this era of scarce resources (and even in the flush 1990s), having adequate funding for evaluation remains a challenge, and evaluation may be the first line item to be reduced or eliminated. We always try to carry out the most rigorous evaluation allotted by the budget. We know from experience that spending money on evaluation can, in the long run, save an organization even more money, by indicating what is the most efficacious allocation of project resources.

What does success look like? Success may look different to the program developer, to the funder, to constituents, and to the evaluator. Therefore, communication among all the stakeholders is imperative, so that programs or services, when released, reflect the full range of stakeholder criteria. Moreover, communication about these perspectives tends to result in fewer surprises when the outcomes are revealed.

Best wishes,

Irene F. Goodman, Ed. D.
Founder and President

Goodman
Research Group, Inc.

PERSPECTIVES

Goodman Research Group, Inc. (GRG) is a Cambridge, MA-based research firm specializing in evaluation of programs, materials, and services for clients in the education, non-profit, corporate, and government sectors.

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Echoes and Reflections

The Project

A comprehensive mixed-methods evaluation of *Echoes and Reflections*, a multimedia Holocaust curriculum developed in partnership by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), the USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education, and Yad Vashem, The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority in Jerusalem. Integrating written materials and videotaped testimonies, the curriculum was designed to introduce educators to new methods for using primary sources when teaching about the Holocaust. It also aims to expose more educators to the use of visual history in the classroom and promote a way to foster a common knowledge of the Holocaust and its relevance to contemporary society.

GRG's Approach

GRG's evaluation, led by Dr. Elizabeth Bachrach, spanned a two-year period and included both formative and summative research. Overall evaluation goals included: assisting project developers from the three partnering organizations as they finalized the curriculum, documenting the two-tiered training process as well as the distribution of the product, and assessing the curriculum's overall effectiveness.

Results

Findings from the evaluation clearly indicated that *Echoes and Reflections* filled a gap for many public, private, and parochial educators by providing them with comprehensive training and a high-quality curriculum that enabled them to greatly enhance the depth and context of their students' knowledge of the Holocaust. Student data also reflected the fact that *Echoes* had a very positive influence on participants.

IN BRIEF

Harvard Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics

Chandra X-ray Observatory

GRG recently began serving as external evaluator of the Education and Public Outreach (EPO) Program of the Chandra X-ray Observatory. Launched in July of 1999, Chandra is the most sophisticated X-ray observatory built to date. GRG's comprehensive evaluation will explore students', educators', and the public's level of awareness of the Chandra mission, X-ray astronomy, and space science research.

Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding

Building Blocks for Democracy

The Tanenbaum Center is a New York-based, non-sectarian non-profit organization that is a leader in providing practical programs to address the growing problem of verbal and physical conflict perpetuated in the name of religion. In 2007, GRG completed an evaluation of *Building Blocks for Democracy: Children Celebrate Their Tradition*, a Tanenbaum curriculum that aims to teach children to value and respect themselves and others, while promoting their understanding of community and civic involvement.

WETA-TV

Reading Rockets

GRG has served as the external evaluator of *Reading Rockets* since 2002. Funded by a major grant from the U.S. Department of Education, *Reading Rockets* is a multi-media project that aims to "inform and inspire parents, teachers, childcare providers, administrators, and others who touch the life of a child by providing accurate, accessible information on how to teach kids to read and help those who struggle." GRG's evaluations have focused on the effectiveness of a range of resources and materials.

Evaluation Can Be Fun and Meaningful at the Same Time

By Karen Peterman, Ph.D.

Imagine a group of students racing across a local park with GPS units in hand, working together to complete a scavenger hunt that consists of successive locations. As they run from one location to the next, they look for a second team, racing on its own scavenger hunt course to the same finish line. Passersby stop to ask, "What's going on? Is this a Summer Camp or something?" "Yes," a staff member replies, "and it's also our evaluation."

The above is an example of an embedded performance-based assessment, a method that GRG evaluators have begun integrating into our multi-method evaluation designs in recent years. Performance-based assessments can be defined as evaluation activities that require participants to demonstrate their skill or knowledge by performing program-related tasks. The use of this technique is considered an embedded assessment when the performance-based tasks are seamlessly integrated into a program, such that the evaluation activities and program activities are virtually indistinguishable.

There are many benefits to using this method. First, performance-based assessments do not burden participants with tasks, such as surveys, that can feel unrelated to a program's activities. Perhaps more importantly, these assessments have high construct validity (i.e., the degree to which an assessment measures an underlying concept) since they require participants to demonstrate their abilities. As such, performance-based assessments offer an accurate and authentic measure of the program activities. They also are enjoyable for participants to complete.

GRG's recent focus on embedded performance-based assessment began with our evaluation of *Technology at the Crossroads*, a program created by the Girls Get Connected Collaborative and Simmons College in Boston. Working closely with the project team, GRG designed and implemented a field day event consisting of games that required students to use the science knowledge and technology skills they acquired from the program in a competition against other teams. The GPS scavenger hunt presented at the beginning of this article is an example of one of these games.

Embedded authentic assessments can also include the analysis of existing program activities, which is the case with GRG's evaluation of an online interactive game being created by the University of California San Diego as part of their NSF-sponsored Information Technology Engineering and Environmental Education Tools (IT-E3) project. The game includes a series of missions that require students to use open-

ended inquiry skills to solve real-world problems in virtual Antarctica. It also captures every move that students make in the virtual world, and GRG is collaborating with the project team to analyze these data to demonstrate students' use of inquiry and process skills within and across missions.

GRG's evaluation of the Simmons College Libraries MassBLAST (Building Library Awareness and Staff for Tomorrow in Massachusetts) project has also taken advantage of planned program activities. This project team created a number of performance-based assessments to measure the success of their sites at providing library interns with key concepts (e.g., arranging books by call number). These assessments allow library sites to monitor teaching success, and GRG to measure the interns' library knowledge.

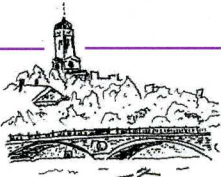
Existing program plans can also be expanded to serve both the project and the evaluation. For example, the Dan River Information Technology Academy (DRITA) program at the Institute for Advanced Learning and Research provides high school students with training in specific IT and workforce skills. GRG is gathering baseline data on students' interview skills (prior to receiving training in this area) by holding mock job interviews and then coding those interactions for skills that will be featured in the training. These baseline data will be compared to students' performances in a second mock interview that is part of the program's implementation, and they will also serve as information the project team can use to target training for individual students.

Regardless of how embedded performance-based assessments are created and integrated into a program, these innovative techniques require a strong client-evaluator collaboration and a proactive approach to planning both program and evaluation activities. GRG encourages program developers to think about ways to incorporate these methods into project and evaluation plans. We have found the professional experiences and relationships that result from their use to be some of the most rewarding for ourselves, our clients, and most importantly, program participants.



Karen Peterman, Ph.D., Senior Research Associate, joined GRG in October 2002, and has completed over 25 evaluations at GRG. She began conducting performance-based embedded assessments in 2005, and these methods continue to play a prominent role in her work.

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PLEASE NOTE: We have standardized our emails to lastname@grginc.com.

GRG News

NEW STAFF

Since last summer, GRG has welcomed four new fulltime staff members to our Cambridge offices. In August 2007, research assistants **Laura Houseman**, **Miriam Kochman**, and **Margaret Tiedemann** joined our group.

Laura, who had worked at GRG as a student intern, received her Psychology degree from Boston University. Just after graduation, she embarked on a cross country trip that took her all the way to Alaska. Miriam comes to us from Brandeis University with a B.A. in Psychology and Linguistics, and a minor in French Language and Literature. She spent her junior year in France. Margaret is also a recent college graduate, having earned an A.B. in Sociology from Harvard University. She has had a range of public sector experiences, including internships at a women's shelter and at a food bank in Argentina.

In January 2008, Research Associate **Shirah Hecht** came on board. She holds a doctorate in Sociology from the University of Chicago and has conducted evaluation research at a range of organizations including JESNA, Boston College, and Brandeis University.

CONFERENCES & MEETINGS

GRG staff continued to present findings at conferences and board meetings and regularly took part in important meetings of clients.

In March 2008, **Peggy Vaughan** and **Laura Houseman** represented GRG at a celebration and launch of *Thrive in Five*, the new Boston School Readiness Roadmap that includes goals and strategies to ensure that all of Boston's children enter school ready to learn.

Colleen Manning delivered GRG research findings at the annual board meeting of the American Evaluation Association in February 2008.

In both 2007 and 2008, **Karen Peterman** made presentations at the annual NSF ITEST Summits in Washington, D.C.

Rucha Londhe presented findings from her doctoral thesis at the annual meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development in April 2007.