

LSC Core Update

1997-98 REPORT WRITING

Pointers on Writing Core Evaluation Reports

Reporting guidelines were mailed to PIs and Lead Evaluators in early July. Raw data and tables are now being distributed to projects in the order questionnaires were received at HRI. Report writing is soon to be underway, as evidenced by the increasing number of requests we are receiving for guidance about preparing the report. Though we realize the potential merit in drafting a mock "ideal" report, time does not allow. We have, however, learned from our own efforts to bring this all together in the Year Three Cross-Site Report, and we'd like to share our thoughts about the kinds of reporting that are most useful. (An expanded version of this article is posted on HRI's Web site and can be sent via e-mail or fax upon request.)

Report Length and Format

As requested, most evaluators structured their reports around the sections designated by the 1996-97 Reporting Guidelines. Thus, reports typically included the following sections:

- A 2-4 page narrative overview of the project, including key components of the project design;
- Interpretive responses to the core evaluation questions, distilling quantitative and qualitative data into statements about strength, weaknesses, and impacts of the LSC project; and
- Summary and recommendations, usually a 4-10 page narrative, summarizing the key strengths and

weaknesses of the project and suggesting improvements to the project design and implementation.

Reports typically ranged in length from 30-70 pages. Many evaluators supplemented information collected for the core evaluation with additional project-specific data. Several, for example, quoted open-ended responses from teachers' or principals' evaluations of professional development activities, and others included quotes from interviews with project staff.

Within the general categories established by the reporting guidelines, a variety of formats effectively communicated evaluators' responses to the core evaluation questions:

Paragraph Format

Some evaluators organized their narrative strictly within a paragraph format, weaving in the evidence and illustrative detail.

Key Points

Other evaluators made use of bullets to highlight key points. Sometimes the bullets were followed by narrative paragraphs to elaborate on the point; in other cases the bullets themselves were a series of substantiating statements for a more general observation.

Each of these organizational formats, as well as combinations of the two, worked well as long as the evaluator took care to include **two critical features**:

1. Use of quotes, illustrative details, or vignettes; and
2. Thoughtful synthesis of data with the evaluator's interpretations and recommendations clearly presented.

Strategic Use of Illustrative Information

Teacher Quotes

The most useful and readily interpreted evaluation reports provided supporting evidence and illustrations of key points. Particularly useful were reports that included extensive use of teacher quotes. The excerpt below shows how one evaluator used teacher quotes to demonstrate points made about professional development directed toward using kits in classrooms:

Clearly, the project's module training has proven effective in providing teachers with the kind of support they felt they most needed to begin using the kits. It has built even the most science-shy teachers' confidence, those who may not have taught a lot of science in the past, or those less familiar with some of the particular science topics [the project] modules explore. As a result, the program has been successful in getting nearly all K-6 teachers using [kits]. [Said one teacher:]

"I think if we had to go to using the modules without the training, we'd have been frightened...[we'd] see the big manual and think, when would we have time to go through this? The training over the two days on each module—take each lesson, see how to use the materials, act it out, I mean we became the students, we'd go through the routine stuff. I'd come back with notes, packed with ideas. I've always used my notes from those workshops to teach the module for the first time. The training was everything you'd want and more."

Illustrative Detail

The use of illustrative detail was another effective means of supporting observations and enhancing the

richness of the report. The following excerpt provides an example of how one evaluator used a detailed description to convey the project's use of information for mid-course corrections.

By design, project staff attempted to be responsive to participants' concerns and needs. The design included a discussion session at the end of the first training week and an evaluation survey to provide project staff with feedback. As a result of this feedback, a break-out session was added to the second training week, in which MSTs could participate in discussion groups focused on specific topics or select catch-up time to review the extensive written materials that had been distributed to them. At the participants' request, project staff also included a discussion on how to present the project at their initial department meetings which would be held during the week when teachers returned to school to prepare for the new school year. One participant wrote [to a project staff member] in the second week of evaluation, "...a special thanks for actually listening to our needs and responding so quickly and appropriately."

Vignettes

Vignettes were also very effective for adding detailed information to reports. A few evaluators used vignettes to illustrate classroom instruction rated at various levels on the observation protocols. One evaluator, for example, presented three "scenarios" from classroom observations that illustrated the kind of instruction observed for teachers described as "accomplished", teachers who were "transitioning" toward effective instruction, and the remaining teachers whose classes were characterized as "activity for activity's sake."

We were disappointed that very few evaluators made use of vignettes in their reports, and strongly encourage all evaluators to consider incorporating vignettes in future core evaluation reports. Keep in mind that while vignettes should be based on actual data (e.g., observations of professional development sessions or teachers' classrooms), evaluators may exercise some "poetic license" as they develop vignettes, particularly excerpting parts of an observation rather than attempting to describe everything that was observed.

Thoughtful Synthesis of Data

Another feature that was critical for reports to be useful for HRI was the evaluator's highlighting of the key findings and their implications for the project. While HRI has all of the "details" from questionnaires and observation protocols, the evaluator is in the best position to interpret them and decide which are most important for that particular project. The excerpt below, in response to "What aspects of the professional development are in need of further attention?" illustrates the kinds of observations and comments that characterized the most helpful reports:

There is a need for increased focus on disciplinary content, inquiry and assessment for the...workshops.

According to the professional development observations, there was some question about whether or not the "big ideas" about science were evident during the...workshops. The primary focus of these sessions is, by design, on the procedural aspects of teaching the kits. That is, it is most important that teachers be able to leave the workshop with the "nuts and bolts" knowledge needed to implement the kits in their own classrooms. This, by and large, seems to have happened.

However, it also seems that teachers need more than a "worm's-eye" view of the kits. They need some sense of the larger vision of inquiry, of the science content that underlies the kits, and possible assessment strategies for the outcomes of the kit. Specifically, teachers expressed a need to address assessment issues in the...workshops. It may not be possible or even desirable to address assessment issues in depth while teachers are just beginning to teach kit-based science. Yet, given the centrality of district and state testing, this topic needs to be mentioned or presented as an issue for future discussion during Project workshops.

District Context and Policy Areas

The district context and policy areas present a particular challenge to all of us involved in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the LSC projects. There is no question that these areas (addressed in Core

Evaluation Questions V and VI) are important to consider since the focus on systemic change is a critical part of what defines the LSC projects. At the same time, these are complex areas and ones which tend to change very slowly. Even when changes in district context and policies occur, establishing causal links between those changes and LSC activities will be difficult within the scope of the core evaluation system.

Evaluators should try to identify what stands out as the key aspects of the system that are being targeted by the LSC project; describe any areas in which progress is apparent within the system, especially if (in your judgment) the LSC has had an impact in these areas; and comment on aspects of the system that appear to be particularly problematic with regard to support of high-quality science/mathematics instruction or institutionalization of high-quality professional development.

Since it is the PI's responsibility to work with the appropriate district personnel to help align policy with the LSC vision, evaluators should be able to access much of the needed information through interviews with the PIs.

Things to Avoid

A review of the 1996-97 reports led to some observations about two potentially "hazardous" practices to avoid in report writing, both of which involve reporting in too much detail.

Organizing the report around the subcomponents of the data collection matrix that was included in the LSC data collection manual resulted in reports that were much too detailed and often repetitive. (The matrix is intended to be used as a tool for communicating the defining features that comprise each area of focus within the core evaluation, and to aid evaluators in their synthesis and interpretation of data collected from core evaluation instruments. It is much too detailed to be used as a reporting framework.)

Similar problems were encountered when narratives for Core Evaluation Questions V and VI were structured around each of the individual item ratings (included in the appendix to the reporting guidelines) rather than

synthesizing information about the support and sustainability issues that were most salient for that particular project.

In contrast, evaluators who organized their reports around the interpretive questions in the reporting guidelines typically produced reports with about the right level of detail and with appropriate synthesis of data from a variety of sources.

Reporting out all or most of the quantitative data available led to reports that were so detailed it was difficult to distinguish the key findings. HRI has access to each project's quantitative data, and therefore, does not need evaluators to provide that information in their core evaluation reports. While the selected use of quantitative data to substantiate points is certainly appropriate (and is necessary if the report is intended to be shared with audiences other than HRI) in some cases, evaluators reported so much quantitative data that the reports were both very long and difficult to interpret.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Send us your questions about the LSC core evaluation system. Questions of general interest to the LSC community will be answered in this newsletter.

Q: One of our trained observers unexpectedly left the project. Is there a list of certified observers we can call to get help between now and the next training session?

A: From time to time, new projects or those in need of a replacement evaluator call or e-mail us, asking for a list of evaluators and others who have been certified in the use of the classroom observation protocol. Though we are not in the business of recommending evaluators, we did put out a call for those willing to consider additional work. Quite a few people responded, and we have posted this list on our Web site:

www.horizon-research.com/LSC/list.htm

To add your name to the list of certified observers and qualified evaluators, please notify Claudia Templeton at:

lsc@horizon-research.com

WEB UPDATE

"View Data" Feature on the Web

Be sure to use the LSC "View Data" feature, available for the first time this year. Each lead evaluator was assigned a project-specific username and password to permit access to all interview and classroom observation data submitted thus far. You can convert the data into an Excel spreadsheet by following on-line instructions. So, once you complete your protocols you can get an immediate summary of results, a helpful tool as you analyze data for the core evaluation report. This same service will be available for professional development observations in 1998-99.

Requiring Web Submission in 1999

NSF is moving towards electronic submission of all proposals and reports. Consistent with this trend, and to simplify the cross-site analysis process, NSF has decided there will no longer be scannable versions of the Classroom Observation Protocol or Teacher Interview Summary, starting with the spring 1999 data collection. Starting in the fall of 1999 there will no longer be scannable copies of the Professional Development Observation Protocol.

Evaluator Feedback on Web Process Requested

As we seek to automate the data collection process, we want to make this process as "user-friendly" as possible, and would appreciate feedback from evaluators who have used it. Please take a moment to think about your experience with completing and submitting observations and interviews. How did it work for you? What problems did you encounter with particular protocols? We are now in the process of revising and improving the system prior to the start of 1998-99 data collection, so this is an ideal time to recommend improvements. Please e-mail your suggestions to Scott Hanrath at HRI:

webmaster@horizon-research.com

FYI

Manuals to be Distributed in 1999

Last year the LSC Data Collection Manual was distributed in August at the start of the data collection year. Due to changes in the Professional Development Observation Protocol, which grew out of the PI/Lead Evaluator meeting in January, a substantial portion of the manual was revised and distributed in March at the start of spring data collection. Though we anticipate that the protocols will remain essentially the same, NSF has asked us to return to the previous schedule of waiting until after the PI and evaluator meetings to send the manual. In the interim, we will send PIs and evaluators materials they need before March, including the 1998-99 Professional Development Observation Protocol and Data Collection Sampling Frame Guidelines.

Supplementing the Core: Report Requirements

Projects that are supplementing the core evaluation with extra questionnaires or through mini-grants to conduct additional observations and school documentation studies should be completing those efforts at this time, with the following reporting requirements:

Extra Questionnaires

No report is required. Raw data were returned to projects for their own analysis; the data tables sent by HRI do not include responses from these extra questionnaires.

Extra Observations

All Classroom Observation Protocols should be completed and submitted on the Web (or as scannables) by October 15. If the core evaluation paid for observations of a special group of teachers, a separate write-up is required, outlining what the project learned from those observations (due November 15). If the funds were used to increase the number of random observations, the data should be included in the core evaluation report write-up.

School Documentation

Projects awarded these mini-grants need to submit a progress report to HRI by November 15, 1998. Reports should be sent to HRI by e-mail with a copy to TEECH for posting on the LSC Web site.

Classroom Observation Training and Evaluator Meetings

Dates have been set for the 1999 Evaluator meetings:

Feb. 8–10	Philadelphia
Feb. 15–17	Seattle
Feb. 17–19	San Francisco
Feb. 24–26	Chicago

The current plan is to have classroom observation training for new observers the first day and a half, additional classroom observation work for new and "old" observers the second half of day 2, and discussions of the professional development observation protocol and other core evaluation issues on day 3.

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(This newsletter is available on the Web.)



Dates to Remember

- 8/31/98 End of LSC data collection activities for 1997–98
- 8/31/98 1998–99 Professional Development Observation Protocol mailed to PIs and evaluators
- 9/15/98 Description of Data Collection Activities form due at HRI
- 10/15/98 1997–98 observation protocols, interview summaries, ratings forms and core evaluation reports due at HRI
- 11/15/98 PIs send progress report to NSF with copy of evaluation report
- 12/1/98 1998–99 data collection Sampling Frame Guidelines mailed to PIs
- 1/21–23/99 LSC PI Meeting Washington, DC

Annual LSC Core Evaluation Requirements

- Professional Development Observations (5–8 per year)
- Teacher Questionnaires (300 per subject)
- Principal Questionnaires (population)
- Classroom Observations (Minimum of 10 per subject)
- Individual Teacher Interviews (10; not conducted baseline data collection year)
- PI/Project Team Interviews

Most data collection activities are conducted March–May annually, except professional development observations and the PI/Project Team Interviews, which may be conducted throughout the data collection year (September 1 through August 31).

The PI is responsible for making sure that core evaluation data are collected in a timely fashion and reported to HRI each fall for inclusion in the annual Cross-Site Report prepared by HRI.

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