



Evaluation Take Aways

Free Evaluation Technical Assistance from the Staff of ACET, Inc.

Selecting an Evaluation: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches

When planning an evaluation, one of the first decisions to make is which evaluation approach would be the best fit for the program's logic model. This Evaluation Take Away summarizes three common evaluation design approaches - qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods - and the advantages and disadvantages of each.

Qualitative Approach

In a qualitative approach, information gathered is non-numerical and might include responses to an open-ended survey question, dialogue from a focus group, the answer to an essay question, a term paper, or ideas brainstormed by a group. Qualitative data is not limited to words, however, and could include the contents of an art or design portfolio.

One advantage of the qualitative approach is that contextual information is gathered when the data is collected. In other words, 'why' is automatically provided in the data that is available. Another advantage is that respondents are free to answer any way they would like - they aren't constrained to a pre-determined set of possible responses as you might see on a survey. For instance, on a survey the question "What did you like about the last book you read?" would generate qualitative data. Respondents could respond freely and the 'why' or contextual information would be automatically embedded in their response. Unfortunately, a qualitative approach is often time consuming: it can take a long time to collect and analyze the data. For instance, it would take 10 hours or more to have hour-long interviews with 10 people, and that does not include the time needed to schedule the interviews, transcribe recordings or notes, and analyze and summarize the data. And, because time is very often linked with cost, qualitative approaches are more expensive.

Quantitative Approach

In a quantitative approach, all of the data collected would be counted or quantified. For instance, asking for someone's annual income, their height, or weight would be quantitative data, as would the number of 'hits' on a website, the number of correct responses on a driving test, the number of minutes per week a person exercises, or a car's fuel efficiency (in miles per gallon).

One advantage of using a quantitative approach is it is an extremely efficient method for gathering information, especially for large groups of people. For instance, the U.S. government collects Census information every 10 years. However, the government doesn't try to interview everyone in the U.S.; instead they mail out surveys to be completed, a very efficient form of data collection. And because quantitative approaches are efficient they are also less expensive. For example, an evaluator can leave a stack of surveys just about anywhere and does not need to spend time monitoring survey completion; s/he can pick up the completed surveys later. And with the advent and expansion of online data collection and automated databases, less monitoring is needed from the evaluator, which further decreases the cost of data collection.

One disadvantage to quantitative data is that it generally does not include an explanation of 'why.' For example, respondents might be asked to "Rate the last book you read" using the following scale: "Excellent," "Good," "Fair," or "Poor." That question would generate quantitative data because we could count the number of people who selected each of the four response options. But knowing how many people found a book "Excellent" does not provide any insights into *why* the book was excellent. A second disadvantage is that respondents are limited to a set of response options and they may not feel that any of the

options best describes their experience.

Mixed Method Approach

A mixed method approach incorporates both qualitative and quantitative elements in such a way that the qualitative and quantitative information complements each other. Using the qualitative approach, evaluators collect in-depth information to answer some questions, and, using a quantitative approach, evaluators collect numerical information for other questions. For example, an evaluator might combine qualitative and quantitative items on the same survey. Respondents might be asked to “Rate the last book you read” with the “Excellent,” “Good,” “Fair,” “Poor” scale that would generate quantitative data. A follow-up question “What did you like most about the book?” would generate qualitative data to provide context.

The advantage of a mixed methods approach is that it balances efficient data collection and analysis with data that provides context. The quantitative data quickly and efficiently captures potentially large amounts of data from large groups of stakeholders. The qualitative data provides the contextual information and facilitates understanding and interpretation of the quantitative data. And, because qualitative data is collected from a subset of the stakeholders, costs are mitigated.

The challenge of a mixed method approach is to ensure that the two data collection methods complement – but do not duplicate – each other. When data collection methods are duplicative, costs for gathering that information are essentially doubled. For instance, it would be costly and inefficient to ask both focus group participants and survey respondents to indicate how many times they had visited a program’s website. In contrast, it would be more informative and less costly to ask survey respondents to estimate how many times they visited a program’s website and ask focus group participants *why* they do (or do not) visit the website.

Which Approach to Use?

Often, evaluators are asked which approach – qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods – is ‘the best’ to evaluate their program. And evaluators hesitate to answer the question because none of them are ‘the best.’ Instead, evaluators consider the alignment of each approach with the goals and objectives of the evaluation. The approach that best aligns with the logic model and/or the goals of the evaluation is usually the best approach. For instance, if the program or logic model emphasizes stories from clients and stakeholders, the evaluator would likely recommend that a qualitative approach be used. In contrast, if program staff or the logic model included both qualitative and quantitative information, the evaluator would likely recommend a mixed methods approach.

Resources

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Maxwell, J. A. (2012). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Smith, R. A., & Davis, S. F. (2012). *The psychologist as detective: An introduction to conducting research in psychology* (6th ed.). London: Pearson.

For additional information about this or other ACET, Inc. resources, or for evaluation assistance, please contact:

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