

Worker-led participatory research and evaluation

Lessons from the real world

Reflections of the SREPP participants

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Introduction

In 1997, four U.S. union health and safety training programmes entered into a three-year, multi-union learning-action-research collaborative, the Self-sufficiency Research and Evaluation Pilot Project (SREPP). The initiative sought to build the research and evaluation capacities of the participating unions' hazardous materials trainings, funded by the U.S. National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences.

SREPP offers a new model of participatory learning and action in the area of worker health and safety. While there are important examples of participatory action research within this field, these projects have focused on single worksites; they have also tended to start with a stakeholder labour-management model. By contrast, as a multi-union collaborative initiative, this project has sought to foster participatory learning *across* programmes and workplaces from a union-centered perspective. This project also builds upon the recently expanded role of workers in many health and safety training programmes. Over the past decade, programmes have increasingly embraced a peer training model in which workers serve as the primary health and safety trainers. By expanding the trainers' roles to include evaluation, this project has sought to institutionalise a new base of worker-produced knowledge for improving health and safety.

During the last of SREPP's four training workshops, participants reflected on their experiences in the project through a series of participatory activities. What follows, after some background to the project, are the words of SREPP participants about what it takes to learn about and do participatory evaluation in the context of union-based, worker-led health and safety training programmes.

Pending further grant funding, the original SREPP partners will be joined by a new cadre of union health and safety training programmes in learning about and adopting worker-led evaluations in their programmes. The project facilitators and potential partners are exploring a number of workshop structures to best support future training in light of the supports and barriers encountered during the pilot project.

We invite others to contribute experiences and insights as we embark on this next phase. We have learned in SREPP that collective learning within and among programmes is vital to building solidarity necessary to realise safety and health for all workers.

About the self-sufficiency research and evaluation pilot project (SREPP)

The participants. Each of the four participating union health and safety training programmes selected a team of two to five worker trainers, along with one or more staff persons and programme evaluators, to participate in the project. The same core group of team members attended all four training workshops. Worker trainers had all led trainings for union health and safety training programmes. Most worker trainers and programme staff had little or no prior programme evaluation experience.

The process. At its core, the project consisted of a year-long process of workshops coupled with team-based pilot evaluation projects through which participants learned and applied participatory research methods. Prior to the workshops, the project facilitators consulted with partner organisations to assess their programmes' experiences with evaluation. Throughout the process, the project facilitators worked in partnership with worker trainers from PACE¹, as well as PACE staff and the Labor Institute, to develop health and safety-specific evaluation workshop curricula grounded in the experiences and politics of worker health and safety.

Workshops. SREPP participant teams attended four three-day workshops to expand participants' knowledge and critical analysis of evaluation in real world contexts, including labor-management relations, workplace dynamics of how health and safety change occurs, the different needs and perspectives of programme stakeholders, and how budget and time constraints affect evaluation choices. The workshops also provided opportunities for teams to plan and advance their evaluation projects, and for people from all participating organisations to build relationships and a learning community.

Each training workshop curriculum was designed to work in tandem with the development and implementation of team-based evaluation projects. The focus of each workshop was as follows.

- Workshop One – Exploring research and evaluation issues
- Workshop Two – Gathering and analysing data
- Workshop Three – Developing meaning and reporting findings

¹ Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical and Energy Workers International Union.

- Workshop Four – Sharing team-based evaluation projects and developing lessons learned

The workshops used a method called the Small Group Activity Method developed by the Labor Institute. In this method, small groups of participants worked together to complete activities using simulated cases, participants' own experiences and easy-to-read factsheets. A workbook with these experiential learning activities and factual reference materials provided the backbone for each of the four workshops.

Team Projects. Each team engaged in activities to design and implement their own team-based pilot evaluation projects between May 1998 and May 1999. While all teams engaged in evaluation projects examining their union's hazardous materials health and safety training programme, each team tailored its evaluation to its programme's particular goals and concerns. See Box 1 for the range of Team projects.

Box 1 Team Projects

Single worksite

School District – Short survey and focus group (AFSCME)

Municipality – Pilot individual interviews (AFSCME)

Oil Refinery – In-plant labour-management refinery team use of 'Charting How Your Programme Works' and monitoring new safety and health initiatives (PACE)

Programme-wide (Multiple worksites)

Worker Understanding of Systems of Safety – card sort focus groups (PACE)

Workplace Impact – phone interviews (UAW)

Week-long training conference

Quick feedback to evaluation participants about their rating of training quality – survey (UAW)

What we learned

Teams of people in different roles should be involved in evaluation

1. *The job of evaluation belongs to staff, worker trainers, and workers.* Everyone involved in a programme should be involved in its evaluation. And everyone involved in a programme should be involved in using information learned from the evaluation.

2. *Participants involved in evaluation need to understand the importance of their role.* It is important that the people who participate in an evaluation understand the purpose of the evaluation and why their input matters. It is also important that evaluation participants receive feedback about the evaluation findings to which they contributed.

Evaluations should be useful to and used by all involved in a programme, at all stages of a programme

3. *Evaluations are not about collecting information to be filed away and gather dust.* Evaluations are not just for collecting information. Evaluation project teams need to ensure that information is shared and used by all who are involved in the training programme.

4. *Evaluation should be part of a programme's continuous cycle of learning.* Evaluation needs to be incorporated throughout all stages of the health and safety programme, the beginning, middle and end, as opposed to occurring only at the end. Findings should be used to continuously improve training programmes.

Planning an evaluation includes considering its users and identifying supports and barriers to carrying out the programme

5. *An effective evaluation must consider its users and identify supports and barriers in its planning.* First and foremost, an evaluation should identify what type of information is needed, who will use it, and what the programme's goals are. An evaluation plan should identify what supports and barriers may impact on the programme, and account for these as the evaluation plan is developed.

6. *'Charting How Your Programme Works' enables you to identify realistic objectives in a specific time frame.* Charting is a highly adaptable, participatory, visual process that can be used in a broad range of evaluation-related activities. Some of these applications include assisting teams to define programme goals, develop curriculum, develop project time lines, and identify project outcomes, evaluation priorities and indicators to measure their achievement.

Selecting, developing and using the 'right' evaluation designs and methods can be challenging

7. *There are diverse evaluation methods for diverse situations.* Different evaluation methods (i.e., surveys, focus groups, etc.) can be used to satisfy different evaluation needs.

8. *Developing simple unbiased evaluation tools/instruments is more difficult than originally perceived.* It is difficult to develop simple, clear and unbiased evaluation instruments and questions.

9. *Being persistent – keeping at it – leads to success.* It takes a lot of time, effort, flexibility and persistence to overcome logistical barriers to carrying out an evaluation.

Union health and safety training programmes share a common pool of knowledge . . .

10. *Union health and safety training programmes share a common pool of knowledge and experience.* Unions share more similarities than differences in health and safety

philosophy. Unions confront similar problems and can provide meaningful and constructive feedback to each other.

How we learned and changed

We learned or changed through the following.

Sharing and critically reflecting on each other's experiences both within our teams and among different unions. Shared experiences were especially rich because of the diversity of people and programmes who participated. While learning from others' experiences was key to every area of learning, the following aspects of sharing were particularly highlighted.

- *Sharing a diversity of perspectives and roles within teams.* Working in teams of worker-trainers, union staff, and evaluators helped participants understand and value the importance of involving multiple people in different roles in evaluation. It also helped to identify how evaluation can be useful to all involved in a programme.
- *Sharing experiences among partner teams over time* was important to learning that union health and safety programmes share a common pool of knowledge and experience. Sharing strategies and experiences about the barriers and supports faced by different team-based evaluation projects also provided support for actually implementing evaluation projects and encouragement that persistence could lead to success.

Participating in interactive, hands-on, experience-based workshop activities and using workbook materials was identified as important to learning about participatory evaluation. Particularly useful activities included:

- sharing our training programmes to identify similarities among programmes;
- exploring the effects that evaluations can have on people and programmes;
- considering different reasons for doing evaluations;
- identifying different programme stakeholders and their information needs as part of developing an evaluation plan;
- learning different methods of evaluation through 'trial and error' activities where participants designed and conducted interviews, surveys and focus groups during the workshop; and,
- working through sample scenarios faced by a 'made-up' union provided opportunities for participants to strategise how to deal with real-world issues in designing and carrying out an evaluation. These included multiple stakeholders with different information needs and levels of buy-in, analysing sample evaluation data and communicating findings to different audiences.

Using the process of 'Charting How Your Programme Works'. Charting was a vehicle for participants to clarify underlying assumptions about programmes, to sharpen desired programme outcomes, and to link programme outcomes and evaluation activities. Key elements in charting include first identifying long-term outcomes, then

identifying mid-term steps toward that outcome and the supports and barriers that may affect arriving at it and finally, detailing the short-term steps and actions that need to occur.

Carrying out team-based evaluation projects and critically reflecting on the process. Conducting a team-based pilot evaluation project provided experience in applying the workshop learnings. Project teams gained experience in involving people in different roles in evaluation and in developing evaluations useful to different people within a programme. It also helped participants deepen their understanding of the strengths and limitations of different research methods. At each workshop, project teams reflected on the supports and barriers they were facing in carrying out their evaluations; this regular sharing facilitated learning among teams about real-world challenges and potential strategies for carrying out evaluations.

Supports and barriers to doing participatory evaluation

Project teams identified the most significant supports and barriers they faced in doing participatory evaluation. Participants found that each of the following could be either a support if it was present or a barrier if it was not.

Meeting with and learning from other team members and other organisations.

The ability for participants to get together to learn from others within their teams and from peers within other organisations engaged in similar efforts, provided crucial support for doing participatory evaluation. The training workshops provided a focused and dedicated place where all project team members were able to meet, reflect on what had happened and plan for their next implementation steps. Sharing within teams and gaining input from SREPP facilitators also provided important ideas and inspiration for how to carry projects forward. Teams also needed on-going access to each other between workshops in order to carry out their team-based evaluations. The team that had been funded to fully implement a demonstration project had a history of communicating through conference phone calls along with resources to support those calls and other meetings in person. However, other teams sometimes had difficulty meeting to plan and move projects forward between workshops. Lack of time, difficulty in communications (i.e., no access to e-mail or financial support for conference phone calls) and/or geographical distance all made it difficult for these teams to meet.

Building skills through training workshops and ongoing access to project facilitators.

The workshops provided critical technical information and the opportunity to practice learning new skills. The workshop materials and contact with the project facilitators also provided important technical assistance as projects were implemented, although what facilitators could do from a distance was also limited.

Time necessary for participants to attend workshops and to implement their evaluation projects between workshops.

Lack of time was the over-riding barrier faced by most participants.

- *To attend workshops.* While all participants were able to attend all workshops, several had difficulty securing time off from work to participate.
- *To implement project evaluations.* Only one team was specifically funded to implement a demonstration project. Many members of other teams had to implement their team project on their own time, after work. Especially when evaluation project work was not made part of a paid job, competing priorities interfered with participants' abilities to devote as much time as they would have liked to their project.

Organisational support for participatory evaluation greatly influenced the supports and barriers participants faced.

Optimal support included time and logistical support for participants to implement their evaluation projects. Organisational support ranged from allocated staff time and workers' paid leave to carry out their evaluation projects, to long-distance and conference phone calls, to in some cases, data-entry assistance. Where evaluations were site-specific, the support of employers and the local union was also important. When there was inadequate support, participants faced difficulties in implementing their projects.

Our emerging model of worker-led, team-based participatory evaluation

At the close of three days of reflection on their experiences of learning and doing participatory evaluation, participants identified what they saw as key elements and characteristics of worker-led, team-based, multi-union participatory evaluation (SREPP). Our model seeks to:

- Build a community united in a shared commitment to the rights of all workers to safe and healthy workplaces.
- Actively involve workers in all aspects of evaluation.
- Be a collective effort – within and among partner organisations – that draws upon each other's insights, strengths, and experiences to learn and carry out evaluation.
- Understand evaluation as a process of continuous learning, rather than being an end product. Evaluation is an ongoing process that should be woven throughout health and safety training programmes.
- Provide important ways to measure and document programme successes.
- Recognise the importance of identifying programme values and goals to guide evaluations.

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