



Best Practices for Field Days

Environmental Field Days Assessment Tool: Focus Group Results

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The following results are based on two focus groups conducted in October, 2007. The 14 participants (7 at each focus group) had gone through the Assessment Tool training on the use of the tools and also had used the tools to assess environmental field days.

Focus group questions specifically addressed both the quality of the training as well as the tools (individual and holistic) themselves. The participants were asked not only to describe their experiences but also to provide recommendations to improve the training and the tools. During the focus group discussions it became clear that participants also wanted to address the actual day of the observation, or the field day experience itself. Thus, the results address these three key areas: 1) the day of the training; 2) the field day experience, and 3) the tools.

About the day of the training

Overall, focus group participants believed that the training went a long way in helping them understand how to use the tool. However, there was also consensus that they left the training with a lot of questions. It is interesting to note that those who were more experienced in environmental education and field days had a much easier time during the training, as well as using the tool. More specific suggestions for improvements of the training include:

- They really needed more time, everyone felt rushed! They did appreciate that no time was wasted. However, they would suggest about 6 hours, including time to look over the tools at home prior to coming to the training. They needed more time to process!
- Providing a clearer explanation about the objectives of the day as well as the overall effort, what to expect when they are actually out there using the tools, and what will be done with the results.
- The video clips were a great way to teach key concepts and sections. They would like to see more variety of clips. They would also like to see more clips to assess one key aspect at a time. Then, together as a group, have discussions.
- They weren't quite sure why they got put at tables together until later. They would like to have known that they would be going out to assess together. Round tables would have facilitated getting to know each other. Also, it wasn't communicated clearly about group leaders and what they should be doing.
- There definitely wasn't enough training on the holistic tool.

About the day of the observation

Generally, participants felt that there needed to be a better transition from the classroom training to the observation day. They felt that if you have not participated in a field day before, you would really have been handicapped. And indeed, that was the case for several people. Even if they were experienced, participants didn't know what to expect during the field day, hadn't worked out the logistics of where to meet and when to start and how to transition between stations, and how the team would work together. Suggestions for improvements include:

- If people are not experienced in environmental field days, change the training to include this learning curve.
- Those who were experienced were also biased because they had a pre-conceived notion about how the field day should happen. Maybe you can address how to deal with these potential biases.
- The field day has a certain flow, some stations do not fit the assessment tool. Some are only 20 minutes. Also, some things (like students being late) are not the presenter's fault. The tool is unforgiving.
- It would have helped greatly if evaluators could have skipped a session to catch up, reflect, and discuss issues with other evaluators. They felt very rushed. A question: how will the tool be used in the future, evaluated by teams or individuals?
- Some raters were not in agreement about what they were seeing at the session... for example, some thought the first 15 minutes was the introduction, others thought it was the presentation. What is an introduction?
- Groups of evaluators discussed among themselves about the ratings throughout the day. Some changed their scores based on such discussions. It really helped them. But they were uncertain if this was ok, since they understood the project team wanted to assess coder reliability.
- Things were very rushed at the end. The holistic piece didn't get much attention.

About the Individual Tool

Perhaps reflecting their feeling that they didn't quite understand the holistic tool and how to use it, most of the discussions centered around the individual station assessment tool. Interesting to note, there was much consensus across the two focus groups on issues they had with the tools, meaning, these issues cut across experience levels.

Question 1

They are still a bit unclear about the check. Does the check signal "good"? Should only a certain % be in the exemplary?

The exemplary is very subjective.

Not present is problematic. Some are using it like the low end of a scale, others are using it like "not applicable." They feel strongly that there should be a not applicable because for some stations, not present is appropriate.

The instruction to "complete toward end of station" is confusing for some... a few even thought that it was a directive for the presenter and not the evaluator!

They want a bigger text box for the rationale!

Question 2

Item G was especially problematic. What kind of questions are good questions? They want specific examples of words that you might hear in a good question.

Item N was VERY problematic. Participants were all over the place in terms of how they thought they should be summarizing this. Some were tallying checks, some were weighting checks with pluses and minuses, others were simply scoring based on how they thought the overall presentation went. There needs to be some clear rules about how to tally to obtain a reliable score for N.

More space for rationales!

Question 3

This was the question with the biggest concern. There was very little agreement on what they saw (they discerned this through their discussions).

Two main problems: 1) the definitions of the methods were unclear, or different than their experience; 2) the primary and secondary was a problem. It was difficult when multiple instructors were present, or when there were equal methods, etc.

Question 4

They really want to know if there is a standard. What is good? Is the middle good? What does the middle mean? Is there a right answer? It would be easier for them if they could assess against a standard.

They were wondering if it could be a 5 point scale.

There were a lot of questions around how they should assess. Are they assessing on what they see? Or what the value/quality is? This is a question they had throughout the assessment tool. Are they simply checking as they see it? Or are they assessing value?

Question 8

They really liked this section!

About the Holistic Tool

Question 8

Tallying was very difficult. Could the individual assessment tool highlight things that you'll eventually tally? Flipping back and forth was very confusing.

Question 10

Why is there an extra question that you didn't assess in the individual station tool? Either include the engagement item in the individual one or take it out of the holistic tool.

Some general comments

They believed results would be of interest to presenters, but felt evaluators couldn't be totally honest if they knew the results will go to them, especially if they knew the presenters.

The tool fails to address what they consider the "it" factor... they want to see students running around, touching trees, putting their hands in the water, but the tool makes the field day all about education. For some, this didn't feel right. There was a lot of agreement that this was a scientific tool. They wondered if a scientific tool can measure passion for the environment and sharing that love with the students.

Some felt that the tool didn't address "flow." They felt it skirts it, by asking if it started on time, but didn't really get at how the session was organized, or "flowed".

Outcomes based on Focus Groups

Training

Based on the focus groups, the training was modified to include more time for the Holistic Tool. In addition, the videos were broken down to specifically connect to each key section in the tool. The training materials were sent out beforehand so that evaluators were more familiar with their job and the protocol.

Observation day

During the evaluation day, as much as possible, we tried to team experienced observers with first timers so inexperienced observer could be better mentored. Also, the tool and the protocol were redesigned to better prepare observers to what they should expect in the field. The observers were also allowed break times during the day to get caught up on the paperwork if necessary.

Tool revisions

The tool was modified to use both colors and numbers to direct observers where to go when adding information from the individual tool to the holistic tool. The presentation scale was changed to a 5-point scale with a rubric to anchor each item at the ends and in the middle of the scale. The text and descriptions for each item were rewritten multiple times to clarify and facilitate consistency across all coders.

These changes received positive feedback from returning observers who had used the old tool. They noted that the process and tools were much improved from the first year in terms of its ease of use and capturing the quality of field days.

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